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KING OF THE STRANGE

ROCK 'N' ROLL, RELIGION AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE WEIRD

DONALD AND THE DEMONS

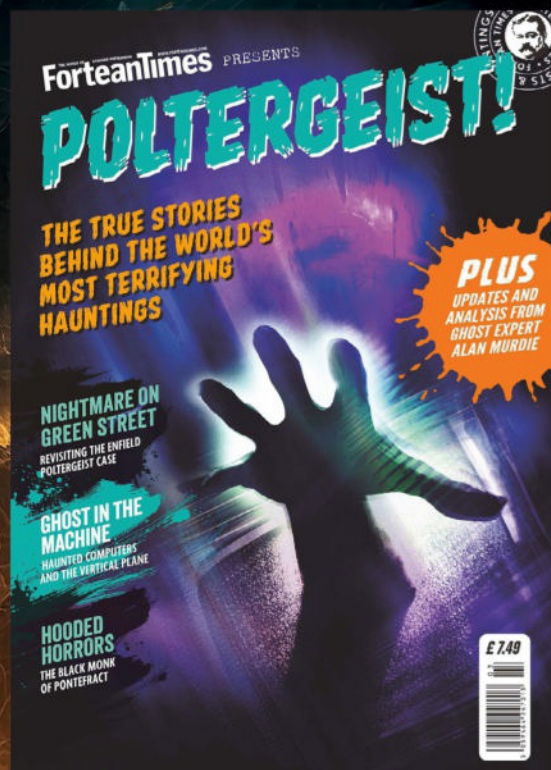
TEAM TRUMP'S FIGHT AGAINST SATAN'S POLITICAL SERVANTS

THE TARVES BEASTIE

GEF THE TALKING MONGOOSE'S FORGOTTEN SCOTTISH COUSIN



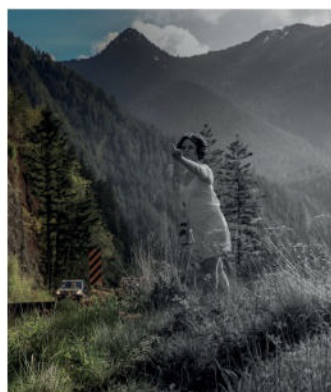
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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Who is the most fortean musical icon of all time? Elvis Presley, of course, who was born 90 years ago this month on 8 January 1935. **NEIL NIXON** argues that while the living Elvis brought religious iconography and supernatural power to rock 'n' roll, his post-mortem career since 1977 has encompassed ever wider realms of weirdness, from angels and aliens to reincarnation and conspiracy theories.

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COVER ETIENNE GILFILLAN



"I'd like to dedicate this cover to the memory of Christos Leontarakis, my best friend and musical mentor who shared his lifelong love of Elvis with me. Here's to good rockin' in Heaven tonight."

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



TRUTH SOCIAL

KINGS OF THE STRANGE

Welcome to our first issue of 2025. This January marks a fortetan musical anniversary: Ninety years ago, on 8 January 1935, Elvis Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi. Just 20 years later, as a shy and slightly strange young man living in Memphis, Tennessee, he was poised to take the world by storm, launching a career that would make him one of the major cultural icons of the 20th century.

But it wasn't just about the music, as Neil Nixon points out in this month's cover feature: the rise of Elvis paralleled the rise of all kinds of extra-musical weirdness, from mass hysteria and faith healing to UFOs and new religious movements. Presley's life, of course, came to a premature end in 1977 – but that's when the multifarious oddness swirling around him really kicked in, with tales of reincarnation, post mortem miracles, visits from 'Spirit Elvis' and simultaneous sightings of a mysteriously still living Elvis all over the USA. We've covered the fortetan aspects of many musical figures in FT over the years – from David Bowie and Pink Floyd to Sun Ra and the Grateful Dead, but none of them has made as many appearances in these pages as Elvis: it's hard to argue with Neil's assessment of him as the King of the Strange.

Donald Trump, soon to be President of the US for a second time, appears to be an Elvis fan too. He posthumously awarded Presley the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2018, but has also boasted that his rallies draw bigger crowds than Elvis's concerts and wondered if he might be "greater" than the King himself. No surprise, then, that Trump can't help getting sucked into Elvis-related weirdness: he recently posted

an uncaptioned and somewhat cryptic AI-generated image of himself and the King, his hand on Presley's back. Even more bizarrely, Trump had earlier in 2024 posted an image showing half of his face spliced with half of Elvis's, writing: "For so many years, people have been saying that Elvis and I look alike. Now this pic has been going being going all over the place. What do you think?" While we doubt the Donald is actually the King of the Strange, he will probably (again) turn out to be the President of the Strange, at least if SD Tucker's survey of Team Trump's demon-hunting plans is anything to go by – turn to p.46 for the full story.

ERRATA

FT448:37: Eric Hoffman would like to correct a small error in his article "The Piasa Bird of Illinois", noting that "the limestone quarrying that ultimately destroyed what remained of the Piasa bird began in the late 1840s, not the 1940s."

FT449:17: Gail-Nina Anderson writes: "The artistically creative spirits and mediums discussed in Alan Murdie's fascinating article on 'Scotland's Spiritualist Art' were perhaps less accomplished when dealing with numbers. Notable medium Daniel Dunglas Home may never have been detected in fraud, but if he really lived from 1859 to 1883 as cited, there wouldn't have been too much time for investigation, especially as he held his first séance, in America, in 1851. More feasibly, his dates were 1833-1886 and he died at the age of 53." Peter A McCue also spotted the error, adding that tuberculosis was the cause of Home's death.



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A PHILOSOPHER ONCE NOTED
THAT PEOPLE LONG FOR IMMORTALITY
BUT RUN OUT OF THINGS TO DO
ON A RAINY AFTERNOON



EXPAND YOUR MIND, REFINE YOUR WARDROBE

ISSUE 118 • WINTER 2023

CHAP

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

FOLKLORE SURVEY REDUX | New project takes a broad view of national identity

It is clear that folklore has been having something of a revival over the last few years. Folk horror as a genre has become a thing, small press magazines like *Weird Walks* and *Hellebore* have been going from strength to strength, and organisations like Stone Club have been looking at our heritage through a modern lens. A whole new generation of musicians like Laura Cannell and Stick in the Wheel have reinvented folk music for the 21st century, and even morris dancing has been getting a rethink by innovative groups like the experimental all-female side Boss Morris. The BBC have got onboard too, with Charlie Cooper's series *Myth Country* (see p.61) taking an irreverent tour of folklore inspired by that forteen classic *Folklore Myths and Legends of Britain* (see FT427:28-35). It is timely, then, that FT stalwart David Clarke, from The Centre for Contemporary Legend at Sheffield Hallam University, along with his colleague Diane Rodgers and Ceri Houlbrook and Owen Davies from Hertfordshire University, have obtained a grant of £271,000 from the Arts & Humanities Research Council for a two-year project, The National Folklore Survey.

"I've been wanting to get a new survey off the ground for some years," Clarke says. "But there



never seemed to be an appetite for it until now". His team will be working with the polling company Ipsos-UK to poll almost 3,000 people across England in the first phase in order to get a clearer picture of what folklore means there today. If the project proves successful, Clarke is hoping to extend it for a further three years and to survey Britain's other three nations. Clarke felt it was useful to start with England because "it is the English who are confused about their identity and embarrassed about their folklore and traditions, even though the concept and study of 'folklore' was invented here in the 1840s!"

The inspiration for this survey comes from the 1964 Survey of Language and Folklore, which was carried out by two Sheffield University academics, John Widdowson

ABOVE: The many faces of British folklore (clockwise from top): The Haxey Hood, Lincolnshire; the Ottery Tar Barrels, Devon; Dick, the Wild Horse of the Antrobus Soulcakers, Cheshire.

PHOTOS: ANDREW ROBINSON





PENIS PROBLEMS

Giant, ossified, poisoned and triple members

PAGE 8



SEASONAL SPIRITS

Classic Christmas hauntings

PAGE 16



MERMAIDS AND MYTHS

The 2024 Legendary Weekend

PAGE 24



DAVID CLARKE

ABOVE: Dr Diane Rodgers (left), Dr David Clarke (second from left) and Andrew Robinson (right) with Professor John Widdowson, co-creator of the 1964 folklore survey, at his home in the Peak District. BELOW: One of the 1964 folklore survey collecting slips.

and Paul Smith, who toured the country in a red mini, handing out forms in town centres, community halls and Women's Institute meetings, as well as to anyone who visited their university. They asked just one question – “What do you know to be true?” – and got thousands of replies, producing a fascinating patchwork of observances, superstitions and local legends, passed down through families and communities. “The 60s survey had no boundaries and never fully ended; the survey slips and anecdotes were still piling up in Prof Widdowson's office when I was an undergraduate student there in the early 90s,” says Clarke. “We're hoping to get a much more representative sample of people than were surveyed during the 1964 project.”

The new survey's purpose is to address the lack of robust research evidence into the cultural value of folklore in post-Brexit, post-pandemic, multicultural England. Clarke explains: “We want to find out what people think of as folklore in this day and age, and how it relates to national identity.” To do this it will address two research questions: “How have folkloric beliefs and practices shaped England's so-

THE SHEFFIELD SURVEY OF LANGUAGE AND FOLKLORE

LANGUAGE OR FOLKLORE ITEM: (PLEASE WRITE ITEM EXACTLY AS HEARD/REMEMBERED/PRACTISED. Give a detailed example showing how, when and why it is said or done. Quote EXACT words if possible).

THREAT TO CHILDREN.

"They [i.e. people in general] used to say: Springheeled Jack'll 'ave 'old on you, if you go out in't dark!" [ʔpɪŋhɪldʒæk ɪ əv ould on ʒə ɪf ʒə goʊ aʊt ɪn't dɑːk]

Collected by J.D.A. Widdowson 32 Sheffield (year/rate) (age) (home community)

From whom did you learn this? My grandmother, Mrs. F.A. Johnson. 90 Sheffield (name & relationship to you) (occupation) (age) (home community)

Local people, Sheffield.

From whom, where and when did he/she learn (or practice) this? Sheffield, Oct. 11, 1967. Oct. 17, 1967.

Where and when did you hear this from your informant? Date of writing this item

Please return to: J. D. A. Widdowson, English Language Department, Sheffield University OVER

“The revival of interest in folklore is a wonderful thing”

cial, cultural and spiritual identity?” and “To what extent are ideas of nationalism and colonial attitudes informed by contemporary notions of English folklore?” Clarke feels that “What we need is hard, reliable data – and that can only be supplied by a stratified survey of this kind.”

The researchers are taking a broad view of what constitutes folklore. “It can be anything from legends such as Robin Hood to local haunted houses or areas of UFO sightings,” says Clarke. “But folklore is really any custom or story passed down through generations... we might think of things like morris dancing or

people chasing cheese down hills, but events such as the Notting Hill carnival have been going so long they're now part of custom and tradition.” He sees folklore as something that unites people in England. “Folklore is the social glue that holds us together. We can disagree on politics, fight the culture wars, but tradi-

tions, customs and stories passed down bring people together.” Considering the resurgence of interest in folklore that he feels has enabled the survey to be funded, Clarke says, “In some respects it is a counter-movement against the connection that many people feel they have lost with the environment and other human beings due to the atomisation and loneliness associated with the obsessive desire to move everything online – in the process of which we become more isolated and cut off from the traditions that people clearly feel are important to share face to face. I hear this from young people constantly.”

“The revival of interest in folklore is a wonderful thing,” he adds, “and long may it continue.” <https://folklore-society.com/blog-post/announcing-the-national-folklore-survey/>; *theguardian.com*, 20 Oct 2024.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SCIENTISTS DISCOVER GIANT MISSING BLOB OF WATER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ATLANTIC

indy100.com, 28 Oct 2024.

Ten years to end zombie apocalypse

Metro, 25 Sept 2024.

TORTOISE STARTS FIRE

The [York] Press, 29 Oct 2024.

Cavan dog breeder bitten by taxman

Irish Times, 15 June 2024.

GOOD NUTRITION 'FUELS BRAIN', HEAD DECLARES

Hull Daily Mail, 8 Nov 2024.

Postal worker bitten whilst delivering leaflets on dog awareness

manxradio.com, 14 July 2023.



SIDELINES

JAMMIE DODGE

Richard Freeman of the Centre for Fortean Zoology made the headlines when he discovered that some of the biscuits in a packet of Jammie Dodgers he had bought contained no jam. "I've been attacked by a cobra, stalked by a tiger in Sumatra and caught in a tornado in the Gobi desert. But when a man can't have a whole Jammie Dodger with his cup of tea, then something is wrong," he said. *thesun.co.uk*, 3 Jul 2024.

SEALING THEIR FATE

Two drug smugglers realised they were in serious trouble when their boat ran aground on the remote Burton Island in Australia with £588,000 worth of cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine on board and was spotted by police. They fled the beached yacht and tried to hide their haul under seaweed but were then cornered by an angry seal that, according to officials, "jumped up with its big chest out and bellowed at them" and had to be rescued by officers. *D.Telegraph*, 13 Sept 2019.

SCROTUM SNAKE

As soon as Tanat Tangtewanon from Samut Prakan, Thailand, sat on the loo for a morning visit in early August he felt a sharp pain in his testicles. Looking down, he found that the source of the agony was a large python that had come up the toilet pipe and sunk its teeth into his scrotum. He managed to shake the snake off his tackle and tried to drag it out of the bowl, but it was too strong, so he beat it to death with a toilet brush. Fortunately, as pythons are not venomous, his injuries were minor. *bangkokpost.com*, 22 Aug 2024.



UNDER THE ICE | Some slightly gruesome discoveries shed further light on historical vanishings

MOUNTAIN OF DOOM

The triumph of Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary's first ascent of Mount Everest (known locally as Sagarmatha or Qomolangma) in 1954 has always been haunted by one of the great "what ifs?". What if they were not the first? What if George Mallory and Andrew "Sandy" Irvine had made it to the top during the 1924 Everest expedition? On the morning of 8 June 1924, Mallory and Irvine set off from their camp to make an attempt on the summit in what Mallory described as "perfect weather for the job". They were last seen by fellow expedition member Noel Odell, who spotted two tiny figures near the Second Step, close to the summit, during a brief parting of the clouds late in the afternoon, after which they were not seen again (see **FT173:50-54**).

The pair were assumed to have died on the mountain, but no one knew if they had died before reaching the summit, or after. No trace of them was found until an expedition searching for the climbers' remains found Mallory's body in 1999. Rope injuries and broken bones indicated that Mallory had died after a long fall, and tantalisingly there was no sign on his body of the photograph of his wife he had intended to leave at the summit. His dark snow goggles were also in his pocket, which suggested he'd died in the evening, during the descent. None of this could absolutely prove Mallory and Irvine were first though. Irvine, however, had been carrying a Kodak Vest Pocket Camera lent by expedition member Howard Somervell, with which he intended to photograph the summit should they reach it. If Irvine and the camera could be found, it might contain film that could provide final proof of a victorious ascent.

Now, a *National Geographic*

WAS THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST REACHED?



"I lifted up the sock and there's a red label stitched into it"



TOP: Artist's impression of Mallory and Irvine climbing Everest. ABOVE: Jimmy Chin with the boot and sock discovered on the Central Rongbuk Glacier.

expedition searching for Irvine has got closer to the solution. Following up a number of clues, they searched the Central Rongbuk Glacier and discovered a boot containing a sock and part of a leg protruding from the ice. "I think it literally melted out a week before we found it," said senior expedition member Jimmy Chin. The boot was made of old, worn and cracked leather and the sole was studded with the diamond-patterned steel hobnails characteristic of 1920s climbing gear. Then, Chin says, "I lifted up the sock and there's a red label that has 'A.C. IRVINE' stitched into it," adding, "We were all literally running in circles dropping

f-bombs." The team sampled the foot inside the sock for DNA to compare with Irvine's family and confirm the identity of the remains, but as Chin says, "But I mean, dude, there's a label on it." They were intending to leave the foot on the mountain, which Irvine's family regard as his grave, but after seeing it being pecked at by birds, they removed it and placed it in the care of Chinese mountaineering authorities, who have responsibility for that part of Everest. Chin's team have not made the exact location of the find public to deter trophy hunters, but are confident that more of Irvine's remains are close by, possibly with the missing camera, and *National Geographic* intends to continue the search. *theguardian.com*; *nationalgeographic.com*, 11 Oct 2024.

ARCTIC DEATH

Sir John Franklin's 1845 Northwest Passage expedition intended to find a navigable route from the Atlantic to the Pacific through the Arctic to the north of Canada, but they too mysteriously vanished from history. Its ships *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror* were last sighted by a whaler in July 1845, after which there were no further reports of them. In subsequent years numerous expe-



ABOVE: *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror* (seen here in an 1847 painting by James Wilson Carmichael) were last sighted by a whaler in July 1845. **BELOW:** James Fitzjames, whose cannibalised skeleton has now been identified.

ditions, both at sea and on land, sought the lost expedition, but despite scattered clues, found neither the ships nor surviving crew. Abandoned equipment and two skeletons were discovered, and local Inuit told of seeing ill and dying white men straggling across the frozen tundra. They also recounted disturbing rumours of cannibalism. Eventually, it became clear that the *Erebus* and *Terror*, their wrecks only discovered within the last 10 years (see FT376:4), had been crushed by the ice near King William Island in what is today the Canadian territory of Nunavut and that the 105 surviving crew members had attempted to walk to safety, but had slowly and remorselessly suffered grisly, freezing deaths. Modern expeditions have located and investigated various graves and skeletons, and research has shown that the sailors probably died of the cold, as well as pneumonia, tuberculosis, starvation and scurvy, compounded by lead poisoning from poorly soldered food tins and botulism endemic in the animals they trapped and ate. Some of the remains showed that the rumours of cannibalism were true. The identity of some of the dead was determined by grave markers, but now DNA and genealogical analyses have enabled archaeologists to make the first identification of one of the skeletons showing signs of cannibalism. This came from the frozen



“Cut marks indicated his body had been cannibalised”

ground of a site on King William Island where 451 bones from at least 13 Franklin sailors were found, and turned out to belong to James Fitzjames, a senior officer on *HMS Erebus* who had led the sailors after Franklin's death. His lower jaw showed multiple cut marks indicating that his body had been cannibalised. “The identification of Fitzjames's remains provides new insights about the expedition's sad ending,” said anthropologist Douglas Stenton. “This shows that he predeceased at least some of the other sailors who perished, and that neither rank nor status was the governing principle in the final desperate days of the expedition as they strove to save themselves.” *phys.org*, 24 Sept 2024.



ABOVE: The graves of John Torrington, William Braine, John Hartnell and Thomas Morgan on Beechey Island, Nunavut, where the expedition overwintered.

SIDELINES

SEAGULL SHOPLIFTER

For six years staff at the Lyndale Central store in Wyke Regis, Dorset, have been duelling with a persistent avian thief they have dubbed “Steven Seagull”, who sneaks in to grab bags of crisps from a display beside the door. Manager Stuart Harmer, said the bird had thieved about 30 packets of crisps in the past two months alone. “Trying to explain to the powers that be that I’ve got stock loss because of a seagull – they think it’s a joke,” he said. “Steven” is particularly fond of BBQ beef and sought out the flavour even when staff booby trapped the display with extra spicy crisps in an attempt to deter him. *BBC News*, 25 Jul 2024.

NOT THE BRIGHTEST SPARK

Emergency services and the bomb squad rushed to a house in Billinge, Lancashire, after neighbours reported hearing an explosion. They found a man in his 80s with “serious leg injuries”. He had been trying to open a safe containing gunpowder using an angle grinder, with predictable results. One of the attending firefighters described it as a “once-in-a-career incident”. *Metro*, 23 Feb 2024.

23 TROUBLE

An attempt by an unnamed woman to test her blind date's generosity in Zhejiang, China, backfired. She ended up stuck with a £3,100 restaurant bill when her date fled after refusing to pay for the meals of the 23 relatives she had brought along without telling him. *D.Star*, 3 May 2024.

CANDY CRIME

While visiting her son in the Craighead County Juvenile Detention Center, Arkansas, Jessica Williams, 37, ended up in custody herself. CCTV showed Williams putting money into a candy vending machine in the jail, then shoving it against the wall and “backhanding the glass”, shattering it. She then helped herself to the contents before complaining to a prison officer that the candy machine was broken. He had Williams arrested, but despite her explaining that she had only attacked the machine because it had taken her money and not given her any candy, deputies still charged her with theft and criminal mischief. *kait8.com*, 8 Jul 2024.



SIDELINES...

HOT WAFFLES

A Rio de Janeiro pastry shop has caused a stir in Brazil. Named "Putaria", it specialises in genital-shaped waffles and advertises them with neon signs saying things like "Tastier than your ex", which has proved popular, with queues often forming outside the Ipanema bakery. However, it hasn't amused authorities who have banned the sale to minors of "all products reproducing or suggesting the shape of human genitalia and/or body parts with a sexual, erotic or pornographic connotation", and required the shop to take down or cover up their signs, although this apparently hasn't affected sales. *africanews.com*, 13 Aug 2024.

YOU SCREAM...

Dutch farmer and politician Erik Stegink has had a big hit with pig milk ice cream. For sale at his "Piggy's Palace" farm where visitors can come and view the animals and have "Pig-nics", the pork ice cream is described as "a bit fatty, nice and creamy, with a strong 'gamey' flavour." *S.Mail (Aus)*, 19 May 2024.

BEAR-FACED CHEEK

The fifth round of the Vancouver Intermediate Ladies Championship at St Fintian's Gaelic Football Club in Canada had to be abandoned due to "bears on the pitch", the second time the club has had to abandon a game due to bear incursions in recent months. A club spokesperson blamed "fame-hungry bears" and said, "They definitely have the ladies schedule back at the den, they never miss a game." *irishexaminer.com*, 23 Jul 2024.



MARTIN ROSS

PENIS TROUBLE | Male members make the news, from a giant phallic artwork to a sporting disaster



INDEPENDENT PHOTO AGENCY SRL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: "Tu si 'na cosa grande", a work dedicated to Naples by sculptor and designer Gaetano Pesce, certainly provoked discussion in the city. BELOW: Olympic pole vaulter Anthony Ammirati's chances were scuppered by his penis.

BIG ONE

The Piazza Municipio in Naples, Italy, recently became home to a sculpture by Gaetano Pesce, who died earlier this year aged 83. Named "Tu si 'na cosa grande" ("You're a big thing"), it is an 11.8m (38.7ft) phallus, streaked with multi-coloured veins. Pesce saw it as an interpretation of Pulcinella, the iconic Commedia dell'arte character who has been an integral part of traditional Neapolitan puppet shows since at least the 17th century and is now an emblem of the city. Before his passing, Pesce issued a statement which explained that the sculpture, which lights up from within, was intended to "express his gratitude towards these surroundings that bring great energy both to his creative work and the people that he loves". Mayor of Naples Gaetano Manfredi said that he hoped this sculpture would generate a buzz, and it did, although perhaps not the one intended. Responses included comments calling the monument "disgusting" and a "piece of crap", while others said, "nothing to do with art, that's my personal opinion", and "it looks like a giant dildo".

Others said that the sculpture looked like a giant dildo

Unbowed, Manfredi said, "being discussed means the work has achieved its goal." *news.com.au*, 11 Oct 2024.

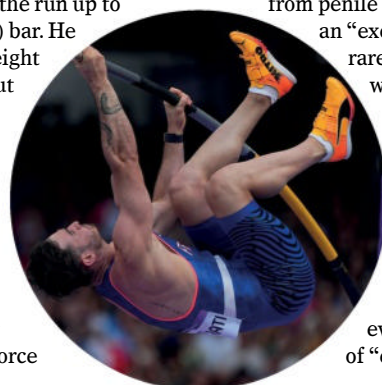
COCK UP

French Olympic pole vaulter Anthony Ammirati had already made two successful vaults and was confident that a third would see him reach the final, putting him in contention for a medal, when he took the run up to a 5.7m (18.7ft) bar. He cleared the height effortlessly, but as he came down and let go of his vaulting pole, his penis, swinging loose inside his shorts, struck the bar with enough force

to send it crashing down, losing Ammirati his place in the finals, but gaining him many admirers, who made footage of his errant masculinity go viral. "Today, I missed my competition. I knew that this qualification was going to be tough and now I'm taking it in the face," said the unimpressed Ammirati. "The Olympic Games are over. I'm going to pack my bags before going home." *metro.co.uk*, 3 Aug 2024.

BONER

Following what he thought would be a routine X-ray to investigate hip pain after a fall, a 63-year-old New York man received a very surprising diagnosis. He was suffering from penile ossification, an "exceedingly rare" condition where the penis gradually turns into "extraskel-etal bone". The medical report stated that there was evidence of "extensive,



DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



plaque-like calcification along the expected distribution of the penis” caused by calcium salts accumulating in the soft tissue along his penile shaft. The patient was not suffering from any of the other symptoms usually found in such cases, like discharge or swelling, and against medical advice he refused further examinations or treatment and left the hospital. *interestingengineering.com*, 14 Aug 2019.

TRIPLE DICKER

Students at the University of Birmingham Medical School received a surprise when dissecting a 78-year-old man who had donated his body to science: they discovered that he had three penises. The man was about six feet (1.8m) tall with a medium to large build, and at first appeared to have normal genitalia. The additional penises were found to be vestigial and hidden within the skin of his scrotal sac. As a result, medics believe it is likely that he remained ignorant of his triphallia throughout his life. Only one of his penises was functional but primary and secondary penises shared a urethra, which “coursed through the secondary penis prior to its passage through the primary penis” and it was noted that “he may have lived with functional deficits due to the abnormal anatomy of the region, which may include urinary tract infections, erectile dysfunction or fertility issues”.

While there have been about 100 recorded cases of diphallia – having two penises – this is only the second known case of triphallia. The other was an unnamed three-month-old baby from Iraq discovered with the condition in 2020. Medics, though, commented that polyphallia, having multiple penises, is probably more common than people realise, with many cases never coming to the attention of doctors. *metro.co.uk*, 16 Oct 2024.

SIZE MATTERS?

A barber’s shop in the Thai province of Ayutthaya attracted a lot of attention on social media with a price list that charged customers based on the size of their penis, saying “Small penis 40 baht, Medium penis 60 baht, Large penis 80 baht, and Mo (modified) penis 100 baht”. The barber, Apirak “Tee”



The man decided to chop his penis into four pieces with a blunt axe

Klinbuppha, 40, said his sign had received very positive feedback, and that charging by penis length had played an important role in attracting customers. Further reports suggested that Apirak’s cheeky price list was simply a successful publicity stunt, and that the charges were in fact his usual ones based on age, ranging from children (40 baht) and high school students (60 baht) to adults (80 baht), with the 100 baht price covering more complex hairstyles. *asean-now.com*, 10 Sept 2024.

POISON PENIS

After suffering a week of problems with his genitals, including redness, swelling and scabbing on his penis, a 38-year-old man sought help from urologists at the American University of Beirut Medical Center in Lebanon. After tests, medics discovered that his penis was infected with *Bacillus cereus*, a bacterium normally found in rice that has been left at room temperature for too long and which can cause severe food poisoning. The man confirmed that the symptoms had followed an episode of sickness and diarrhoea that had started almost immediately after “vigorous sex” with his wife. Doctors concluded that this had caused some of the bacteria to come into contact with his penis while it was still engorged, which can make it easier for them to get through the skin.

Doctors said that this was the “first case in literature” of this sort of food poisoning in the penis, adding that it was

“unusual” to see *Bacillus cereus* infections in the skin, let alone the genitals. The man was sent home with fucidic acid, a topical antibiotic usually used to treat eye infections, and was told to wash the area “properly” and avoid sex and masturbation until it healed. *dailymail.co.uk*, 29 Aug 2024.

JARRING

A 37-year-old Austrian man suffering from depression and alcohol abuse experienced a psychotic break after taking the hallucinogen psilocybin in the form of “four or five magic mushrooms”. Alone at his holiday home at the time, the man decided to chop his penis into four pieces with a blunt axe. Having done so, he panicked and packed the fragments in a jar along with dirty snow and soil and wrapped the stump in a cloth. He was found confused and bleeding heavily by a passer-by, who took him to a nearby village and called an ambulance. Rushed to hospital in a critical condition from blood loss, the man was taken into surgery immediately, where doctors, having cleaned and debrided the severed penis fragments, were able to reattach the tip of the penis and 2cm (0.7in) of the shaft, although a further 5cm (2in) could not be saved. Amazingly, he healed well, and four months later was reported to have “a good urinary stream and erections” with only minor complications. He was, though, placed under intensive psychiatric care and given medications after psychotic symptoms continued and he showed religious delusions. *euronews.com*, 30 Sept; *nypost.com*, 29 Sept 2024.

SIDELINES...

FLORIDA MAN

“Of all the Florida Man things I have seen, that might be the Florida Manniest,” an X user said regarding a viral 30-second video of a local using a live alligator to open a can of beer. In the clip, a man on a boat can be seen splashing the water to get a small alligator’s attention, then antagonising the reptile with the beer can until it bites it, piercing the can with its teeth. The man then swigs from the open can to applause from other men on the boat. *local12.com*, 5 Jul 2024.

FLORIDA WOMAN

Florida Highway Patrol pulled over Laura Riley, 41, in St Petersburg on suspicion of drunk driving and on searching the car discovered a bag prominently labelled “Bag of Drugs”. This contained cocaine, crack, crystal meth, hydromorphone, amphetamines and alprazolam, plus an assortment of well-used drug paraphernalia, resulting in Riley’s arrest on a variety of charges. *abcnews4.com*, 31 Jul 2024.

TORTOISE VS TRAIN

In 2022 a tortoise named Clyde brought rail services between Cambridge and Norwich to a halt after being spotted ambling along the line. Now, another tortoise has repeated the trick, bringing chaos to services between Ascot in Berkshire and Bagshot in Surrey by wandering onto the tracks, leading to four trains being cancelled while staff retrieved him. Shortly afterwards another tortoise was spotted on the tracks near Southend station in Essex, but was rescued without causing any disruption to services. Train operator c2c said that the tortoise was “safely shell-tering” with ticket office staff, while locals commented he had been moving faster than the trains. *BBC News*, 20 Jul, 15 Aug 2024.

BIN THERE...

Andy Bailey, 39, from Congleton, Cheshire, has taken to photographing local rubbish bins and posting them on Instagram on a quest inspired by finding a bin in the shape of a bear. He gives each bin a score out of 25, rating them on personality, placement, popularity, performance and “pristine”, and has evaluated more than 100. His favourite, in a shopping centre, earned a 23, but he feels some are not fit for purpose, saying, “One’s just a piece of metal on a stick”, and giving it an eight. *Sun*, 1 Apr 2024.



SIDELINES...

PSYCHIC STRIKE

Staff at The Arthur Finlay College, which trains mediums and psychics, went on a surprise strike over zero-hour contracts and “untenable” working conditions, leading to one student to comment: “We didn’t see this coming. We don’t hold it against the tutors at all; they’ve just said enough is enough.” *Sun 5 Aug 2021.*

THE BANKING DEAD

When Declan Haughney and Gareth Coakley took the corpse of a relative to the post office in an attempt to fool them that he was alive to claim his pension in 2022 (FT418:10), they seem to have started a trend. Earlier this year a Brazilian woman tried to get a loan by taking a relative’s corpse to the bank, and now Loreen Feralo, 55, and Karen Casbohm, 66, from Ashtabula, Ohio, have been arrested for theft and gross abuse of a corpse for taking the very dead Douglas Layman, 80, to a bank and propping him up to withdraw money from his account. *D.Mirror, 20 Apr 2024.*

GNOMIC

When Kelly Blair of Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada, woke to find the battered gnomes that had been on his front lawn for years missing, he assumed someone had just stolen them. Days later, though, an elderly woman arrived at his door and handed Blair an envelope addressed to “The Homeowner”. It contained a cut-out image of a gnome with “The Gnome Restoration Society” written on the back. Refusing to answer any questions, she led Blair to a vehicle and gave him his gnomes, now restored to pristine condition. Other locals have had similar experiences, but no one has been able to identify who The Gnome Restoration Society are. *kelownacapnews.com, 5 Jul 2024.*



BLACK-EYED KID

Horribly charred baby sign puts Japanese general store on the map



For many years a general store in Nagahama City, Japan, advertised itself with a sign showing a cute baby with a speech bubble saying “We have lots of good, cheap things”. However, a particularly hot summer in 2023 affected the ink on the bill-

board, destroying the baby’s eyes and turning it into a facsimile of one of the sinister, mythical “black eyed children”. Once the decay had started, further heat damage this year turned the baby into a charred, screaming monstrosity. While store owner

Masanao Itaya initially intended to replace the damaged sign, he noticed that people from all over Japan were visiting his store to photograph the “possessed baby” and decided that removing it would be bad for business. *oddtitycentral.com, 7 Oct 2024.*

THE C NSPIRASPHERE

In 2018 Dawn Sturgess became the first alleged British victim of Novichok. As the public inquiry into her death wraps up, **NOEL ROONEY** ponders some of the dangling loose ends...

SKRIPAL SAGA REVISITED

Polonium and Novichok: it could be the name of an unfunny double act, or absurd characters in a Samuel Beckett drama. For close to 20 years now, the shadow of these monstrous compounds has hung over the British political scene. And that shadow, if you look out of the corner of your eye, takes on the shape of a bear. But then we live in times, it seems, where a few rogue molecules can bring the world to a juddering halt.

Litvinenko's fatal tea party in 2006 was a shock, at least in part because no such high-profile suspicious death had occurred since Georgi Markov's terminal encounter with a baleful umbrella on Waterloo Bridge in 1978. Twelve years later, the Skripal affair updated the method and the poison. And three months later, the first alleged British victim of Novichok, Dawn Sturgess (pictured above), brought the exotic drama home.

The inquiry into Ms Sturgess's death has just wrapped up and, unsurprisingly, it has wrapped the case up pretty neatly; she was the victim of an unfortunate accident involving Novichok, due to a perfume bottle (the alleged delivery method in the Skripal case) being left by the less than stellar assassins in a charity pick-up box. Three months later, Sturgess's boyfriend pilfered the bottle and gave it to her as a gift; the rest is post mortem.

Dissidents and conspiracists got excited about the Sturgess inquiry because it gave us another glimpse into the original incident. And there were a few tantalising morsels to chew over, including testimony from the Skripals, although they didn't appear in person. In fact, they never



The original toxicology report found no trace of Novichok

appear in person; rumours of imprisonment and even murder have followed them into obscurity. Nonetheless, the eyes and ears of the C-sphere were finely tuned to proceedings.

Neat narratives (and, according to some, their gradual unravelling) have been a feature of the whole affair. Consider the official line: two Russian assassins, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov (both aliases, it transpires), travelled to Salisbury. They located Skripal's home and 'painted' the nerve agent onto the front door handle from a perfume bottle. Sergei and Yulia Skripal returned to the house soon after and then went to a restaurant. About three hours later they both collapsed in a local park. Luckily, the Chief Nurse of the British Army happened to be passing and alerted the authorities. Both became very ill but made a full (if invisible) recovery, as did a local police officer who had come into contact with the poison. A miracle.

Or perhaps a series of miracles. Novichok is water soluble and it was raining

that day. Would both Skripals touch the (exterior) front door handle? It supposedly has an instant effect, so how did they manage to go off and enjoy a full meal, with their MI6 handler? And wasn't it odd that two people of different sex, age, height and weight, succumbed simultaneously on a park bench? And how did the assassins manage to dispose of the perfume bottle still sealed in the cellophane wrapping? And how did it remain in a regularly emptied pick-up bin for three months until Ms Sturgess's friend purloined it? And if it's instantly dangerous in very small doses, how (or possibly why) did the Russians apply it to the door without using protective clothing? The police officer smeared Novichok all over his house, but none of his family were affected. And it's perhaps interesting that their handler didn't notice anything amiss with his charges during that three-hour lunch.

The post mortem on Ms Sturgess aroused some interest. The original toxicology report found no trace of Novichok, but a long list of other things, including cocaine and fentanyl. It took a second investigation, this one carried out at Porton Down, 11 days later, before the nerve agent was identified. The original cause of death was uncertain, but by the time of the inquiry it was all too evident: death by Novichok. Case closed. It was up to the conspiracists to point out that Porton Down was an excellent place to discover such a substance.

At one point a snippet of evidence emerged that, perhaps, was not meant for this inquiry. It appears that someone managed to interview Yulia Skripal quite soon after the incident. She was very unwell but was able to indicate that a man appeared in the restaurant

and sprayed something in her and her father's faces. She was no doubt too ill to recall things perfectly, of course. And the lawyers no doubt quite rightly averred that someone must have fed her a leading question; why they would do so was not discussed.

I suspect that everyone involved was satisfied by the inquiry and its outcome. The British Government has been seen to do the right thing, just as its Russian counterpart has been seen to do the wrong one. The conspiracy theorists found plenty of chinks in the official version to feed on. The media got to replay the excitement of the assassination attempt without needing to ask difficult questions.

And in the world of espionage the waters are always muddy, so perhaps it's churlish of some to complain that a few loose ends were left dangling. The assassins have form and the GRU has a reputation. But the story that the official line implies is full of surprises and leaps of retrospective logic; and few observers except the conspiracists appear to be interested.

Perhaps that is our fate, or at least our current condition; events are refracted through so many lenses that every story is no more than a version. And if that is the case, who is to say which version is legitimate?

<https://johnhelmer.org/the-sturgess-post-mortem-records-reveal-no-russian-novichok-was-found-until-the-british-government-ordered-it/>

www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2024/10/the-salisbury-festival-of-russophobia-opens-today/

www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=298730



PAUL DEVEREUX brings news of the latest finds, from England's moors to the Mexico of the Maya

SHADOW ON THE STONE

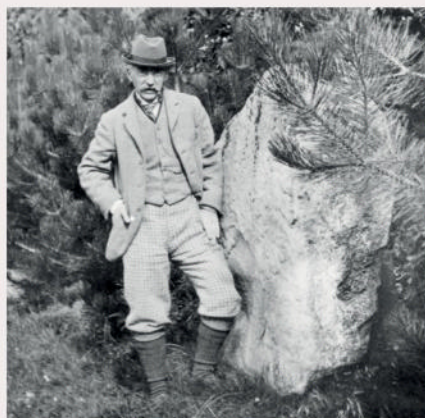
A Neolithic site known as Flagstones lying beneath Max Gate, the former Dorset home of the famous novelist and poet Thomas Hardy, has now been granted scheduled monument status by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, thus giving it legal protection. The c.5,000-year-old site is a circular enclosure 100m (328ft) across, containing "pits, ditches, and rare spiral carvings on Neolithic walls" along with two sarsen stones, one of which was discovered by Hardy himself. This stone figures in one of his poems, "The Shadow on the Stone", believed to have been written after the sudden death of his wife, Emma Gifford, in 1912. Hardy describes seeing shadows of foliage thrown onto the stone which he allowed himself to fancy was that of his wife standing behind him. He forced himself not to look round "lest my dream should fade". *British Archaeology*, Nov/Dec 2024.

HEARTBREAKING

Excavations in 2022 at a burial mound at Pampa La Cruz, northwestern Peru, belonging to the pre-Inca Chimú civilisation, uncovered the skeletons of 76 child sacrifice victims interred in the top portion of the mound. They had been buried naked, but with their clothes alongside them, and had their chests cut open from collarbone to sternum, and their ribcages forced open, presumably in order to remove their hearts. It is speculated that the sacrifices had been in order to "energise the fields". Evidence accompanying the burials indicates that they were non-local victims. Excavations are continuing at other Chimú mounds in the area, and more sacrificial child interments are being found. *LiveScience*, 7 Oct 2022 + 4 Nov 2024.

MYSTERY ON THE MOOR

Out on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, there is a turf and stone feature consisting of a banked enclosure measuring 49m x 21m (160 x 69ft) lined on the inside with 56 standing stones up to 1.8m (6ft) tall. For years it was assumed to have been a mediaeval livestock pen, and in local lore acquired the name of "King Arthur's Hall". But an archaeological excavation of the site commissioned by Cornwall National Landscape has found it to be Neolithic. Using OSL (optically stimulated luminescence), members of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit and experts from the Universities of Reading, St Andrews and Newcastle were able to date the ancient



ABOVE: The so-called "King Arthur's Hall" on Cornwall's Bodmin Moor. LEFT: Thomas Hardy and the Druid Stone

configuration of monuments surrounding the highest part of the moor. He is continuing his research to seek further evidence for this possibility. All this on a moorland where it might have been thought everything of major archaeological importance had already been discovered. *Guardian*, 15 Nov 2024.

AN UNKNOWN NOW KNOWN

To save expense, anthropologist Luke Auld-Thomas (from Northern Arizona University), made use of existing non-archaeological Lidar surveys taken in 2013 for forestry purposes to look for signs of ancient Maya ruins in the dense jungle of Campeche, Mexico. Lidar uses pulsed laser beams projected from an aircraft and bounced back to it to reveal the topography of land surface obscured by forestry. It gives researchers a kind of X-ray vision. There was no archaeological knowledge of Mayan buildings in this part of Mexico, but the section of forest covered by the 2013 Lidar survey luckily revealed numerous ancient Mayan structures there hidden beneath the jungle canopy – and in abundance. There was a major ancient Maya city, in fact, with a ballcourt, broad causeways, temple pyramids, enclosed plazas and a reservoir. Auld-Thomas reckons the architectural arrangement "generally indicates a founding date prior to AD 150." This previously unknown Maya city has been given the name of "Valeriana". *Guardian*, 29 Oct 2024. Source: *Antiquity* 401, 29 Oct 2024.

In FT451:11, this column reported on carved glyphs discovered on a large rock slab in the ancient Mayan city of Cobá, giving information about Mayan rulers and gods, and also of an unknown city called Keh Witz Nal. Whether this is the same as Valeriana is not clear (not to this columnist at any rate). If it is, then it is an utterly remarkable coincidence.

soil inside the monument to confirm it had been dug around 3,000 BC. "There isn't another one of these anywhere," says the lead archaeologist, James Gossip. "There is nothing built at that time or subsequently in prehistory that is a rectangular earth and stone bank with a setting of stone orthostats around the interior. There is no other parallel." *Guardian*, 7 Nov 2024.

MORE MOOR NEWS

We should briefly mention here some recent archaeological news regarding the best-known moor of them all, Dartmoor, in Devon, where two previously unknown Neolithic circles have been discovered due to decades of dogged detective work by archaeologist Alan Endacott and help from volunteers. Back in 2007, Endacott found what is now called the Sittaford stone circle, the first such discovery on the moor in over a century. One of the two new finds he calls the "Metheral" circle (consisting of 20 mainly fallen stones) after Metheral Hill, which it is located beneath. Like Sittaford, it fits into a perceived "sacred arc" of monuments. (His other discovery, "Irishman's Wall" circle, sits just outside the arc and might be an approach or entrance feature.) Endacott suspects that this "sacred arc" could be part of a major circular



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

305: GETTING THEIR GREENS

From *Spitting Image*:

Mrs Thatcher: I'll have the steak.

Waiter: Vegetables?

Mrs T: Oh, they'll have the same.

Bibliography is ever-expanding, print and online. Try: H Williams, *The Ethics of Diet* (1883); C Spenser, *The Heretics' Feast* (1993, considered the first-ever history of Vegetarianism); E Binch-Dann, *Vegetables: A Biography* (2012); L Ballerini, *A Feast of Weeds* (2012); T Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* (2006).

Although fishing is mentioned in a simile, Homer's heroes were unabashed carnivores. In everyday life, many were reluctant vegetarians, being unable to afford meat, their one chance to get it being at pagan sacrifices, a reason for early Christianity's unpopularity in Rome.

Describing Roman campaigns in the East (AD 60), Tacitus (*Annals*, bk14 ch24) makes a surprising remark: "The soldiers were so hungry that they were forced to eat meat." Now, their classic fare was porridge, but it's hard to visualise a legion of vegetarians: perhaps the meat was rotten, like that which helped spark off the mutiny in *Battleship Potemkin*?

That gallant groupuscule, The Socialist Party of Great Britain, used to maintain that vegetarianism was a capitalist plot to lower labour costs by making the working class feed on grass, thereby weakening their physical ability to mount revolution; cf. R Barltrop, *The Monument* (1975), p137.

The word 'Vegetarian(ism)' entered English in 1839. Before that, militant herbivores were commonly known as Pythagoreans. Pythagoras was the first to develop the now-standard 'moral' objections to meat-eating: to kill and eat animals was wicked, both in itself and because it encouraged humans to kill each other. Centuries later, his arguments were expanded by Plutarch in his essay *On the Eating of Flesh*. Killing animals is a crime against nature, taking innocent animal lives and depriving the world of the natural beauty of fauna. An aesthetic rider is his horror at the sight and stench of abattoirs. The clincher: eating meat is not only unnecessary for your health, it is bad for it.

I think here of Sir Andrew Aguecheek's lament in *Twelfth Night*: "I am a great eater of beef and I believe that does harm to my wits" – was there a 'Mad Cow' outbreak in Shakespeare's England?

Around this time (1539), Sir Thomas

Elyot published his *Castle of Health* in which he claimed that fruits and vegetables "do engender ylle (vile) humours and do be oftentimes the cause of putrified fevers, if they be much and continually eaten" – Waddle forward, Henry VIII, who might or might not have taken notice of future resident foreigner Giacomo Castelvetro's *The Fruit, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy* (1614), his mission being "to tempt the stolid English with a healthier diet."

Against Aristotle who denied animals had reason, Roman Stoics who said "They don't have syntax, so we can eat them," and much later Thomas Aquinas who deemed them to have no rights, Plutarch – surely the earliest-known Animal Rights activist – argued that human obligations of law and morality extend to all living creatures who should be treated with benevolent kindness. His remark, "I would not even discard an old ox that has laboured for me," might have been in Orwell's mind apropos Boxer's fate in *Animal Farm*. On the development of these precepts, see Richard Sorabji's *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (1993).

Back to Pythagoras. Most notorious of the many Taboos enjoined upon his disciples was his absolute prohibition on eating beans. From Antiquity on, this has always provoked ridicule and puzzlement. One theory is that beans were regarded as emblems of death. Another has to do with their fart-producing qualities – recall the classic cowboys letting-off scene in *Blazing Saddles* – Pythagoras being of the opinion that whenever you broke wind, a little bit of your soul was lost. Aristotle believed it was an anti-democratic protest by this pro-oligarch sect, since beans were used to cast votes. Even odder is the notion that beans were disallowed as too closely resembling male testicles. Soberer medical thought points to the genetic disease of Favism, commonest in the Mediterranean regions.

Post-script: Pythagoras and followers gained political power in the southern Italian city of Croton. Eventually (as Bertrand Russell put it), the populace hankered after beans and drove them out. Running for his life, Pythagoras came to a bean-field. Could have saved his life by crossing it, but he wouldn't, so was overtaken and killed. At least you can't say he was a has-bean.

Hippocrates ('Father of Medicine') prescribed a seasonal regimen: no vegetables in winter, some in spring, lots

in summer, and so on, with some meat admitted, all to be washed down with diluted wine. His later counterpart, Galen, understood both the importance of fruit and vegetables for health and (e.g.) skin conditions and the protein-deficiencies of country folk reduced to living on grass and weeds. Also, as Hippocrates, he advocated wine as beneficial – full details in Mark Grant's *Galen on Food and Diet* (2006).

A Latin poem *Moretum* (Pestle), sometimes attributed to Virgil, describes an old peasant and slave-woman rising at dawn to prepare a kind of herbed cheese spread which, with bread, had to get him through a hard day in the fields. Classicists nowadays tend to translate the title as 'Ploughman's Lunch', an advertising term only invented in the 1950s.

Apicius's *Cookbook* has a chapter on vegetable dishes entitled *Pandecter* (Many Ingredients). Most recipes involve what we'd call 'sides', but there are ones for barley and vegetable soup and vegetable stew with flower bulbs included for their supposed aphrodisiac properties.

Celebrity post-classical vegetarians include: Einstein, Gandhi, Da Vinci, Franklin, Tolstoy, Kafka, GBS ("Animals are my friends. I do not eat my friends"), and (very late convert) Bill Clinton.

There's one more. Adolf Hitler. Here, I amiably part company with FT colleague Mat Coward whose very first Mythconception was a denial of this. Of course, having Adolf onside is an embarrassment to vegetarians (same applies to non-smokers). To say Hitler was not a Veggie involves ignoring some powerful evidences, archival and anecdotal.

His best biographer, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936: Hubris* (1998), pp261-2 and passim, accepts the claim, marshalling extensive primary sources. One such is Heinz Linge, Hitler's valet, *With Hitler to the End* (English tr. 2009, pp36-7. There's a *Diary* entry (25 April 1942) by Goebbels to the same effect. Stenographic transcripts by Hugh Trevor-Roper from Hitler's *Table-Talk*, show Adolf raging endlessly against the evils of meat-eating, invoking from many historical examples including the aforementioned Roman soldiers in Tacitus. QED.

"Vegetarians, that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking to the smell of 'progress' like bluebottles to a dead cat" – Orwell



Seeing strange new worlds

DAVID HAMBLING examines the key role of vision in how our brains construct a sense of reality

The nature of reality might be beyond our scope, but the question of how we understand what is real is right in FT's wheelhouse. High strangeness experiences, visionary apparitions and other dreamlike events blurring the edges of reality are frequent flyers in the world of unexplained phenomena. Now some bold researchers are starting to explore this field.

These experiences have something in common with hallucinations and some types of drug trip. Certain substances, notably DMT, the active ingredient in the popular South American psychedelic ayahuasca, are remarkably consistent in the way they transport the user to a novel visual world of vivid colour and weird geometries. The strange beings users encounter have been recorded so many times they are now known as "DMT elves." Neuroscientist Zeus Tipado of Maastricht University hopes to use DMT to find out how we construct our sense of reality.

Vision appears to play a central role. You get more sense of an image being real as it occupies more of your visual field, hence the drive for ever bigger movie screens, wall-spanning televisions and virtual reality headsets. The entertainment industry has realised the value of 'immersive experiences' and iMax, with its purpose-built auditoria and special filming requirements, has been tremendously successful despite its cost, because of its power to transport audiences to other worlds.

"Seeing is believing" is more true than you might think. Visual input can override our other senses. Most people have experienced the 'train illusion' at some point, looking out of a train window and feeling themselves moving, only to realise that what they are seeing is an adjacent train moving while their train is still stationary at the platform. The brain sees movement and generates the appropriate sensations. This is calledvection, and is well known to movie makers and video game designers: when the rollercoaster on the screen plummets, you really do feel the pit of your stomach fall away.

Tipado is looking for an immersive experience brain network which gives us a sense of reality rather than seeing an image. While the details are unknown, a key aspect is that the brain is constantly predicting what happens next and



LEFT: Ayahuasca inspired art from Peru.

returns to normality. According to REBUS, psychedelics loosen the hold of the processes underlying the predictive system, so that the world continues to be interpreted less rigidly. When the train starts moving, it keeps moving, and the chair-with-clothes-on-it becomes a person you can interact with.

Tipado is homing in on specific cells in the retina known as amacrine cells. These carry out some of the 'pre-processing' of visual data in the eye before signals reach the brain, filtering it so that it makes more sense. Psychedelics affect the functioning of amacrine

cells and may increase sensitivity to colour in dark conditions, leading to unusual visual experiences such as waves of shapes and colours even when the eyes are closed.

Tipado plans to explore amacrine cells with an experiment that has patients wearing VR goggles while under the influence of DMT. His idea is that the DMT will affect amacrine activity and there will be a tipping point, or a grey zone, in which the VR world presented to patients increasingly appears to be real. At the same time the researchers will be monitoring brain activity and looking for patterns in the visual cortex for signs of a changeover when the immersive experience becomes real. The hope is that this will help uncover the network behind our sense of reality.

These are the first few tentative steps towards understanding how this aspect of the brain works. This research might help explain how the therapeutic effects of drugs like DMT in treating depression, anxiety and PTSD operate. This will assist in bringing such treatments from the fringes of medicine to the mainstream, and ensure that such therapy can be more effectively targeted. It might also help discover what makes virtual worlds believable, both for the entertainment sector and the growing area of virtual reality training for pilots and others.

In the forteen world, the research might tell us more about weird, hallucinatory experiences and how they relate to brain activity. It does not necessarily devalue them: prophetic visionaries and psychedelic explorers claim that altered

They transport the user to a novel visual world of vivid colour and weird geometries

effectively constructs reality from the incomplete experience of the senses. This can lead to errors likevection, where the brain supplies the sensations it is expecting from other parts of the body when the visual system cues them.

This prediction engine is also responsible for perceptual filling in. Each of your eyes has a blind spot, a disc the size of two full moons, which you are never aware of because your brain automatically fills in the blind spot to match the background. Many other illusions play on the visual system's ability to put two and two together and make five, like the way clothing on a chair in a darkened bedroom may look like someone standing there, if only for a split second.

A more extreme version of filling in the gaps occurs with Charles Bonnet syndrome, a common condition in patients who are losing their eyesight, the patient often sees detailed hallucinations of tiny people, faces and objects (see **FT125:14, 184:46-49, 321:53-54**).

According to one theory, known as REBUS (for RELaxed Beliefs Under pSychedelics), the visual system's prediction engine can be disrupted by psychedelics. Under normal circumstances, higher order brain functions pick up the errors and the world

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"The only thing I..."

The only thing I..."



"The only thing I..."

The only thing I..."



"The only thing I..."

The only thing I..."



"The only thing I..."

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"The only thing I..."

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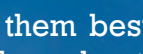
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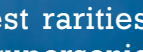
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Ghost Season, Part Two

ALAN MURDIE concludes his survey of Christmas hauntings



ABOVE: The audience at London's Lyceum Theatre, where in 1884 a Mr WH Pollock claimed to have looked down from his box to see a lady in the stalls with a severed head in her lap.

If ever a such a thing as a meta-analysis is performed of the literature of 'true ghost' experiences between 1880-1970 I am sure a preponderance of accounts will be revealed across the Christmas season, from mid-December through into the first week of January. There is a plethora of examples of which the following are just a taste.

In mid-December 1880 a 12-year-old girl, Louise Robinson, lay dangerously ill at her family home in Trent Road, Brixton, London, suffering from typhoid fever. She recalled some 12 years later, for the Society for Psychical Research, "The pain in my head was terrible, like an iron weight." But also troubling Louise and increasing her anguish were pangs of worry concerning her favourite Aunt Mary, whom she knew had fallen very ill at the same time.

The well-being of her aunt became an obsession, tormenting Louise more acutely than her own suffering, since she loved her aunt very much and regarded her as the best friend to herself and the other Robinson children. Every day she begged both her mother and the nurse hired to care for her for any news of her aunt's

condition, the fear of losing her being greatly vexing.

Close to Christmas, Louise awoke and sensed a presence nearby. "I was not alone, for on the chair next to my bed sat my father, who had been dead eight years." Her father spoke gently saying: "Do not trouble mother by always asking how Aunt Mary is for they have covered her with violets, so she has no more pain." As she heard these words, Louise saw other, unrecognised individuals enter the room and her father, lit by a strange blue light, glide to the foot of her bed. Louise experienced no fear, and the visions vanished.

Afterwards, Louise joyfully told her family how "Papa had come", and began to recover and ceased asking about Aunt Mary. She later went to convalesce with another aunt outside London.

One Sunday evening, this aunt revealed Aunt Mary had actually died on Christmas Eve and was buried in the local church. At the funeral, violets were placed upon her coffin, an unusual step, since the family were 'low' church. When well enough to go to the churchyard in late spring, Louise

found Aunt Mary's grave, upon which a bed of violets was planted.

Miss Robinson's account was just one of hundreds of apparitional experiences gathered towards the end of the 19th century by the Society for Psychical Research, with investigators left weighing up the possibilities of hallucination, telepathy or some kind of spiritual presence to explain them.

In 1884 a Mr WH Pollock wrote of the "The Ghost at the Lyceum" in the 1884 Christmas number of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*. Offered as "an absolute record of fact, without a word of garnish", it seems improbable, yet some partial corroboration was claimed.

Seated in a box at the theatre, Mr Pollock and a friend saw, during several hours (with intermissions when the lights were turned up) a lady in the stalls who appeared to have perched on her lap a decapitated head, with a fine profile and a grey Van Dyke beard. They watched with a horrible fascination, rejecting the idea of an optical effect due to the folds of the lady's clothing, as she moved more than once during the course of the evening, whilst the face remained constant.

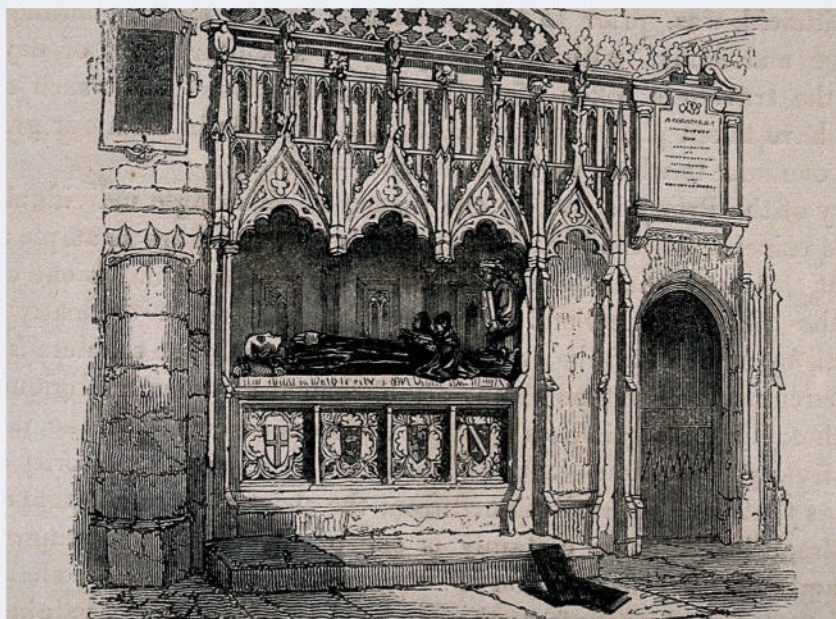
The story frankly sounds implausible; would one really sit calmly if someone seated nearby was nursing a severed human head? One only presumes Mr Pollock and his companion must have perceived that nobody else appeared to see or react to this unsettling vision.

This story led SPR authors into discussing collective hallucinations or optical illusions. An embroidered version with added sequel was told by theatre manager WJ MacQueen Pope (1888-1960). In this expanded variant, the witnesses comprised a husband and his wife attending a Lyceum performance seeing the severed, bearded head positioned on the lap of a female audience member. Years later, the couple visited a Yorkshire country house and saw a 17th century portrait of a gentleman with exactly the same facial features as in their vision. Making enquiries they learned the man had been beheaded under Cromwell, and he once owned the ground on which the Lyceum was built (*Haunted London*, 1972, by Peter Underwood). More widely, it proved significant in starting a tradition of London theatre ghosts.

The Lyceum also featured indirectly in a ghostly pre-vision reminiscent of Charles Dickens's "The Signalman" at the end of 1899. It was documented by the Revd RG Milburn of Wimbledon, one of the witnesses. On Wednesday 27 December, his mother, together with his brother and sister, left their home at Hollywood House in Wimbledon, taking two small cousins and two other children off on a trip to the pantomime at the Lyceum. The Revd Milburn's mother travelled in their brougham carriage with some of the children. Around 4.30pm, a housemaid, a Miss Edith Howe, looked outside saw the same brougham coach waiting by the front door, recognising it as the one that left the house earlier, and identified the same driver. As she watched, a little boy, identified as one of the cousins, stepped out from the carriage and ran up to the front door, yet surprisingly no doorbell followed. After this she saw the coach parked in the yard. However, on mentioning this to the other servants, all unanimously insisted they saw nothing but an empty driveway and yard and no one had returned. At this Miss Howe became nervous, fearing her vision presaged disaster. Meanwhile, separately, the Revd Milburn also noticed a brougham coach pulling up, someone getting out and the vehicle driving off. Simultaneously looking from upstairs, his elderly grandmother also glimpsed a figure she took to be the coach driver below. Milburn quizzed the servants, with all excepting Miss Howe adamantly denying seeing and hearing anything. By now Miss Howe feared the Revd Milburn's mother was dead, saying she came from a village where a phantom coach traditionally heralded such tragedies.

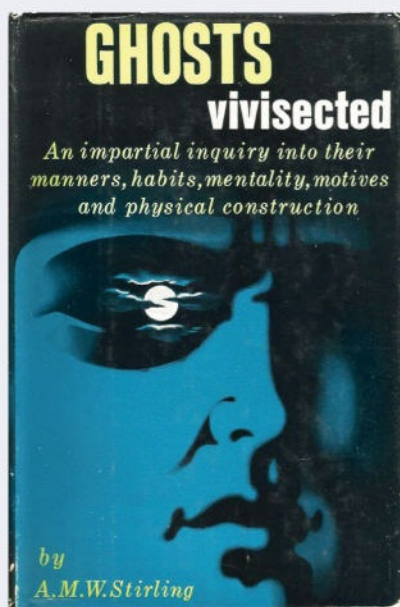
News was not long in coming. Shortly afterwards the entire family party returned unharmed, but in two separate groups. It turned out there *had* been an accident, albeit a minor one. It transpired that whilst the family were watching the pantomime, the waiting coach driver apparently refreshed himself freely with alcohol. When the show ended, he was taking them back in the brougham when it collided with an omnibus. This occurred after leaving the Lyceum between 5.10pm and 5.30pm, about 45 minutes later than the set of visions at Wimbledon.

Immediately, realising they were at the centre of potentially psychical events, the Revd Milburn (an SPR member) meticulously collected witness statements from everyone, adding a sketch map of the house with their relative positions.



ABOVE: The tomb of Rahere in the Church of St Bartholomew-the-Great, Smithfield, where Revd WFG Sandwith was startled by a ghostly monk on Christmas Eve 1907. BELOW: The case was later discussed by AW Stirling in her splendidly titled 1958 book *Ghosts Vivisected*.

"On the capital of one of the pillars, looking at me, was a monk's face encircled by a cowl"



He could not exclude the possibility of a similar-looking brougham accidentally coming up the driveway simultaneously occurring at the same time a nervous or over-imaginative housemaid suffered

a pronounced hallucination. Against this, three witnesses were certain they recognised the carriage or its driver, with two believing they saw somebody approach the house, notwithstanding their originals were elsewhere at the time. Was this an instance of second sight, or what Scandinavian folklore terms the *vardøger* (a premonitory apparition or noise manifesting prior to a visitor arriving; see **FT327:30-33**)? Sources: *SPR Journal*; vol 6 Dec 1893 pp167-168; vol 9 1899-1900 pp247-251.

At Christmas 1907 a quite different ghost manifested to the Revd WFG Sandwith and his wife at Bartholomew's Church, Smithfield. On Christmas Eve Mrs Sandwith was arranging flowers on the altar when she heard a faint sound behind her. Looking round, she beheld a cowed figure a short distance away, its face concealed within a hood. Mrs Sandwith spoke to the figure, but received no reply. Then it glided soundlessly away into the vestry.

The next day, Christmas Day, the Revd Sandwith underwent an extraordinary experience himself, reminiscent of Scrooge's first encounter with Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*. Whilst celebrating Holy Communion, the Revd Sandwith looked up and to his astonishment saw: "[O]n the capital of one of the pillars adjacent, apparently looking at me, was a monk's face encircled by a cowl". Rendered speechless momentarily, it was only on



ABOVE: Stinsford churchyard in Dorset, where on Christmas Eve 1919 Thomas Hardy saw a ghostly man in 18th century clothing. **BELOW:** "Strange Happenings at Penkaet", from *Country Life*, 2 Dec 1954, told the story of the Holbourn family's Christmas 1923 poltergeist outbreak.

becoming aware the congregation were all looking at him in surprise that the Revd Sandwith resumed the service, whereupon the face faded.

Reflecting afterwards, he found the strangest aspect to be how "my wife saw the body of the apparition without the face, and I saw the face without the body." Fearing publicity would risk an influx of journalists, the Revd Sandwith urged his parishioners to keep all ghostly experiences to themselves. Eventually some confidential information leaked out and St Bartholomew's gained a reputation for being among the premier haunted churches in London. Full details of the Sandwiths' own experiences finally emerged decades later, disclosed by Mrs AMW Stirling of Battersea, a well-to-do collector of ghost stories, in her book *Ghosts Vivisected* (1958). By then, the ghost was averred to be the Anglo-Norman priest Rahere, founder of the church in 1123.

On Christmas Eve 1919 novelist Thomas Hardy, then in his 79th year, witnessed a ghostly man in 18th century clothing in Stinsford churchyard, Dorset. Hardy was placing a sprig of holly on his grandfather's grave. The ghost said: "A green Christmas," with Hardy reportedly replying,



"I like a green Christmas." The ghost then entered the church. Hardy followed but found no one. His wife described the incident in a letter stating, "That is quite true – a real Christmas ghost story." Was it Hardy's grandfather?

North of the border at Penkaet House, Lothian, on Christmas Eve 1923, the

Holbourn family were sitting around the fire and singing carols together, celebrating their first Christmas in their new home. Leaning on the fireplace stood a plaque bearing the family crest. This suddenly leant forward, as though bowing to the company! It remained in the position for several seconds before reverting to its normal position. It marked the start of 30 years of strange poltergeisty, often rather puerile object movements and unexplained footsteps, with the Holbourns attributing manifestations to the ghost of John Cockburn, a past owner with a distant family connection to the Holbourns, who was said to have committed a murder. The Holbourns preferred this to a tale about a beggar and wizard named Hamilton cursing their home before being executed on Castle Hill, Edinburgh. Whatever the case, the Holbourns treated their invisible presence as a personality in its own right ("Strange Happenings at Penkaet" by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor in *Country Life*, 2 Dec 1954).

It was very different on Christmas Day 1927, when a working-class household in Battersea called the police after objects began moving by themselves. The police were unable to find any cause. Thereafter, the poltergeist terrified the children and

targeted the elderly father. Pursued by showers of coal, soda and potatoes, he became so scared he sometimes hid under the kitchen table and wore his hat and overcoat indoors. Disturbances expanded into furniture breaking, but the mystery was never properly solved. Notably, this occurred only streets away from the more famous and long-running Battersea poltergeist outbreak in 1956-1968 (see **FT404:24-36**). (*Poltergeist Over England*, 1945, by Harry Price).

From 1927 through to the mid-1940s regular New Year's Eve ghost hunts occurred at Camlet Moat in Enfield Chase looking out for mediæval warlord Geoffrey de Manderville (*Sunday Dispatch*, 24 Dec 1932; *Evening Standard*, 26 Dec 1946).

A Christmas tradition of watching for a ghostly monk between 1924-1934 commenced in Hereford. Appearances occurred around St Peter's Church and the area north-east of the Cathedral four minutes' walk away. Witnesses reportedly included patrolling police officers and visitors to Hereford's Three Choirs Festival. Eventually crowds of up to 200 people descended annually, hoping for sightings.

Relatively few major Christmas ghost reports emerged during World War II, almost as if they were rationed; and although Harry Price's first book on Borley Rectory, *The Most Haunted House in England* (1940), was a bestseller at the end of the year, the ghosts of Borley tended to hibernate in winter and manifest most often in the summer months.

What might be termed a resumption of paranormal service came in the late 1940s. On Christmas Day 1950 at Langenhoe in Essex the Revd Merryweather saw a shadowy form inside his much-haunted church, though his wide variety of experiences long remained private (see **FT354:43-44, 417:20**). Three years later, the Christmas period in 1953 saw a flurry of reports. These included a screaming skull issuing a 'yelp' at a Brighton antique shop, whilst at Chatham Naval Barracks in Kent a phantom sentry was blamed for "sudden gusts of hot and cold air" together with footsteps, chairs moving, and blankets pulled from the beds of sleeping sailors. These phenomena were attributed to a guard murdered by escaping French prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars.

In Inverness-shire rumours were rife of ghostly highlanders retreating from Culloden being spotted on Boxing Day "led by a piper from whose pipes no sound came". In Exeter, meanwhile, townsfolk watched for a knight in armour moving along Lansdowne Terrace. A George Shepherd reported the form disappearing through a brick wall. However, since



ABOVE: The much-haunted church at Langenhoe, Essex, where Revd Merryweather (left) witnessed a shadowy figure on Christmas Day 1950.



A Christmas tradition of watching for a ghostly monk commenced in Hereford in 1924

another supposed witness, Mr Arthur Plumlake, 72, declared, "I saw him this year as I came out of the local, just before closing time", confidence in the reliability of sightings is undermined somewhat. (*Reynold's News*, 27 Dec 1953).

By 1955 the *Church of England Newspaper* for 9 December was declaring "Christmas is the time for ghost stories", regaling readers with a collection of old

and contemporary ghostly tales of varying credibility. That Christmas Eve, a tube worker saw the ghost of murdered actor William Terriss pacing Covent Garden Underground Station.

The 1960s proved just as haunted. In 1961 a ghostly coach was espied heading up Bell Lane, Enfield; previously it had been discerned at Christmas 1899. In 1963 and 1964 phantom footsteps clumped upstairs at the Cross Keys Inn, Saffron Walden, and in 1965 guests arriving for a Christmas party at the Old Court House, Shelsley Wash, Worcestershire, for a Christmas party were startled by a phantom coach careering over the lawn and plunging into the moat. (See *The Ghost Hunters Road Book*, 1968, by John Harries, *Our Haunted Kingdom*, 1973, by Andrew Green, and *Essex Ghosts*, 1973 by James Wentworth Day).

By the time Eric Russell ushered in the haunted decade of the 1970s with his book *Ghosts* (1970) he could remark that whilst satellites passed overhead and 100mph (160km/h) trains roared down continuously welded tracks, literature-inspired images and notions of white Christmases and snow-smothered stage coaches were still alive in the social imagination and provided the perfect atmosphere and mood for real ghost experiences.

And so it remains still today, even with a literary tradition being increasingly supplanted by multimedia re-tellings and smartphones.

As *Psychic News* raised a toast on 24 December 1955: "To the Christmas Ghost, may he long be with us."



KARL SHUKER greets a newly discovered mega-coral and rewatches a long-lost TV favourite

A COLOSSAL CORAL

In October 2024, a research vessel filming for an ongoing National Geographic Society expedition (part of the latter's Pristine Seas project) off the island of Malaulalo in the Solomon Islands sighted what initially seemed like just another very large coral reef, albeit a hitherto-unrecorded one, in the South Pacific. Closer studies of it, however, revealed its astonishing secret. This was no ordinary reef, i.e. one composed of many different coral individuals and species living together colonially and symbiotically. Instead, it was a clone – its countless tiny polyps were all genetically identical. In other words, despite measuring 34m (112ft) wide, 32m (105ft) long, and 4.9m (16ft tall) – so huge, in fact, that it is actually visible from Outer Space – this colossus of the coral world is a single, individual, standalone organism! Indeed, as noted by National Geographic Society explorer and Pristine Seas project founder Enric Sala in a media interview recently: "This is a significant scientific discovery, like finding the world's tallest tree... Just when we think there is nothing left to discover on planet Earth, we find a massive coral made of nearly a billion little polyps, pulsing with life and colour."

Almost three times as big as the previous record-holder for an individual coral clone, a *Porites* (stony coral) specimen recorded from Ta'u Island, American Samoa, in 2019, the Solomon Islands' mega-coral belongs to the species *Pavona clavus*, another stony coral species. It resembles a huge brown mound at first sight, but closer observation reveals a range of different colours upon its hard, knobbly surface, as a wide range of other sea creatures have made their homes upon it. Based upon its massive size and the slow rate at which such corals grow, researchers estimate that this stupendous specimen may be at least three centuries old. Moreover, in spite of the deleterious effects of ocean pollution and global warming experienced by corals in modern times, this marine giant, situated 13m (42ft) beneath the ocean surface, appears to be remarkably unaffected, being in excellent condition and thriving, which is good news indeed. Long may it continue to do so!

www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/coral-world-largest-south



ABOVE: Divers from the National Geographic Pristine Seas project explore the giant coral reef.

BELOW: David Attenborough ventures into the world of cryptozoology in the 1974 *Fabulous Animals*.

[pacific-solomon-islands-b2648859.html](https://www.vox.com/down-to-earth/384668/pacific-solomon-islands-b2648859.html);
www.vox.com/down-to-earth/384668/worlds-largest-coral-discovered-solomon-islands

A 'FABULOUS' TV SHOW

A list of the TV series produced by Britain's premier wildlife broadcaster, Sir David Attenborough, is as lengthy as it is varied, but those focusing upon natural history in its infinite diversity and wonder are unquestionably his most famous and beloved works, and have been publicly released in every conceivable home media format – video, DVD, Blu-ray, etc, as well as via official, lavishly illustrated companion books. In stark contrast, however, what appears to be Sir David's sole foray into unnatural history – investigating the mysterious world of monsters, legendary beasts, and creatures of cryptozoology – has (to my knowledge) only ever been screened on TV once, in 1975, never to be reshow, or released in any home media format. Indeed, the only physical reminder that this very interesting BBC series of six 25-minute episodes – presented by Sir David and produced by Molly Cox – ever existed at all is its official BBC-published companion book: a slim little 80-page volume (both a dustjacketed hardback edition and a paperback edition) co-authored by Sir David and Molly Cox. Once again, however, this has never been republished, but copies still turn up occasionally in second-hand bookshops, online stores, and auction sites. I was fortunate enough to watch this series

during its sole screening on TV here in Britain, purchasing the paperback edition of its book too, and I found it to be absolutely fascinating. All of which explains, therefore, why I have long been so mystified, and disappointed, that this particular TV show has since remained as cryptic and legendary as many of the creatures documented in it. The TV archives confirm that it does still exist in its entirety, not having been lost or wiped as has so often been the tragic fate befalling TV series in the past. How I would have loved to watch it again! Well, now, after a gap of 49 years, I have at last done so! Imagine my astonishment when only a few weeks ago a correspondent casually mentioned to me that he'd just enjoyed watching the first episode of this series on YouTube, and now planned to watch the remaining five, all of which were also on there! Instantly, I sought them out, and yes indeed, there they were. They'd been uploaded by a user just three days earlier, on 3 November 2024, but as content on YouTube can often be very ephemeral, appearing one day and vanishing the next, I sat down and watched all six episodes straight away, back-to-back. Finally – finally!! – I'd watched this truly enthralling mid-1970s TV series from my youth again, and it was every bit as fabulous as I'd remembered it – which is nothing if not fitting, because the title of this prodigal series is... *Fabulous Animals*! I have no idea whether its six episodes will be on YouTube for very long, so I highly recommend anyone else who, like me, has long wanted to rewatch this elusive TV show to do so asap, just in case!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU7ZZ_nHxg4&t=303s





ANIMALS BEHAVING BADLY

Squatting bears, thieving owls, rock-eating dogs, randy dolphins and millipede hordes

BEAR ESSENTIALS

"This is a new phenomenon," said Aleks Giragosian, city attorney for Sierra Madre, California. "In the past two years, like Jurassic Park, the bears have learned how to open doors. I don't know how they learned it. I don't know how they're teaching each other, but they're opening car doors, too." Bears are increasing in number around Sierra Madre, with about 100 sightings in 2020, but 380 in 2023; and while in 2020 bears breaking into houses were unheard of, in 2023 there were 50 reports of burgling bears. One bear has proven particularly brazen. Neighbours of an uninhabited house on Alta Vista Drive in Sierra Madre complained to authorities about an awful stench emanating from the property, sending photos of a bear leaning complacently on a wooden railing surveying the view from the property. Visiting the house, Jonathan Garcia from California Fish and Wildlife said they had found indications that a bear had been living there for some time, including faeces, rotten food, food wrappers and containers. He said that the outdoor shed and the home "were emitting odours associated with organic matter that are attracting varmints" and boarded them up, successfully excluding the resident bear. Meanwhile, locals have started bear watch groups to monitor and counter the growing bear burglary epidemic. *latimes.com*, 21 Sept 2024.

ON THE OTHER FOOT

Since 2022, at least 45 people have been injured in dolphin attacks in Wakasa Bay, 200 miles (322km) west of Tokyo, and authorities believe that a single bottlenosed dolphin is responsible. They suspect that the dolphin, a male, is sexually frustrated as he continually presses his genitals against the people he is attacking, and, as dolphin researcher Putu Mustika from James Cook University explained, dolphins can become aggressive while mating and may be misinterpreting the



ABOVE LEFT: The brazen bear enjoys the view after moving into an empty property on Alta Vista Drive in Sierra Madre, California. ABOVE RIGHT: Another badly behaved 'Bear', this time a corgi that glued his own mouth shut with nail adhesive.

movements of people in the water as an invitation. To try and discourage the randy dolphin, high frequency acoustic devices have been installed at key beaches, and swimmers warned of the danger posed by the animal. *nypost.com*, 27 Aug 2024.

PETS WIN PRIZES

Every year Nationwide Insurance gives the Hambone Award for the weirdest pet insurance claims; mostly, it seems, involving dogs swallowing stupid things. It is named after a dog who ate an entire ham while stuck in a refrigerator. Finalists this year included Bear, a corgi who bit into a bottle of nail adhesive and glued his mouth shut, a dog called Gordon who swallowed two large rocks from her owner's garden, Lambeau, a mixed breed pup who scoffed an entire jigsaw puzzle, and an unnamed Florida dog that ate a wire barbecue brush. The winner, though, was a Shiloh shepherd called Luca who dismantled an entire kitchen cabinet in an attempt to get to the rubbish bin. *[UPI]* 20 Aug 2024.

OWL THIEF

The modern trend for using animals to deliver the rings during wedding ceremonies is not without its hazards. At a wedding in Kirkstall Abbey in Yorkshire, the owl carrying the crucial rings decided to make a break for it instead of taking

The dolphin continually presses his genitals against people

them to the bride and groom. He fled to a windowsill high in the Abbey ruins and settled there, refusing to come down for seven hours, despite his handler trying to tempt him with a bribe of chicken, much to the dismay of the couple and their 50 guests. *hulldailymail.co.uk*, 2 Aug 2024.

DEFEETED

Thirty years after she started renting a beach hut in Branksome Chine, Dorset, Thelma Bartlett, 72, feels she is being driven out by hordes of millipedes. Since September 2023, Bartlett says that "thousands" of the invertebrates have been "taking over" the hut. "The first time it happened was last year. They were in our towels, in the washing up bowl, there were just thousands of them," she said. Bartlett and her partner swept the millipedes out of the hut, but next time they visited, they found that the many-legged arthropods were back in numbers. "They absolutely stank, they were everywhere. I'd wake up in the night thinking about them and get goosebumps," Bartlett said.



NATIONWIDE INSURANCE

She explained that they had used three tubs of ant killer powder to try to tackle the problem, but "Nothing is working, every time you visit you're just wondering how many millipedes will be there today... I can't even walk in there barefoot. I want to give it up - I can't cope," she said, adding that she had to spend about 45 minutes clearing up the millipedes and their faeces each time she visited. A council spokesperson said "Our maintenance teams have visited this particular hut. We are in touch with beach hut licensees at Branksome Chine to provide further advice and are looking at potential solutions." *BBC News*, 3 Oct 2024.

GROUNDHOG DAY

Customers at the Colonel Custard frozen custard shop and mini-golf centre in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, got a shock when they tried to use the mechanical claw machine to win a soft toy. Among the toys in the machine was a live groundhog. No one was sure how he got there but he had probably climbed up the chute. After shop staff, claw machine engineers, and the police failed to remove the animal, game wardens evicted him and released him in a nearby field. "It's a good story that ended well" said shop manager Lynn Castle, "He got set free. No one got bit". *theguardian.co.uk*, 15 Aug 2024.

WILD WEATHER | A rash of mysterious smoke rings, a pillar in the clouds and a rare display of surviving physical evidence for one of Fort's phenomena



KEVIN ALAN BRANDENBURGER

RING WAVE

Videos of three large black smoke rings hovering in the sky over Berlin in Germany went viral on social media in early July. They appeared to the north of the city, triggering widespread speculation as to their origin, ranging from circular bird flocks to Government weather manipulation and, inevitably, aliens, with one social media poster saying, "So either aliens now want to go to Berghain [Berlin's famed Techno nightclub] or God is smoking shisha." No source was pinpointed, but another social media user pointed out that they were most likely "caused by industrial processes or explosions that release soot and exhaust gases into the air" and suggested that Berlin-based rock band Rammstein, who favour pyrotechnic-heavy shows, might have been rehearsing. A few days later, a similar ring was seen lingering in the sky over Pearland, Texas, in the aftermath of Hurricane Beryl, where it remained visible for over 10 minutes. Social media speculation fingered the usual suspects such as bugs and aliens, while Alan Reppert, a senior meteorologist with AccuWeather, said they had no information as to how it had formed and refused to speculate.



TOP LEFT: One of the smoke rings filmed hovering over Berlin in July 2024. **TOP RIGHT:** A few days later, another ring popped up, this time over Pearland, Texas. **ABOVE:** In August, it was the turn of Williamsburg, Virginia.

Many thought it probably came from an electrical transformer exploding after being damaged by the hurricane, but no one could

say which one, so the exact source of the ring remained elusive. Another mystery black ring popped up in August, this time over

Williamsburg in Virginia, where it again lingered in the sky for 10 minutes. This was also blamed on a fire or explosion in the area, but the local fire department said they did not know of any in the area that day and once again the source could not be located. *newsweek.com*, 5 Jul; *chron.com*, 10 Jul; *wavy.com*, 14 Aug 2024.

PECULIAR PILLAR

A social media post in Thailand showing a bizarre pillar in the clouds above the city of Ubon Ratchathani has also caused much speculation. Jessada Denduangboripant, a professor at Chulalongkorn University and a popular science communicator said he believes it could be a distrail. These are the opposite of a contrail where, instead of the passing of a plane creating a trail of cloud in a clear sky, a linear gap in cloud is caused by the plane's warm exhaust evaporating the surrounding cloud as it passes through. However, the person who took the photo claims that he did not see it in the sky when he took the photo, he was just trying to capture the spectacular sunset. If it were a distrail it would have been visible, which led Denduangboripant to conclude that "the mystery of



this pillar persists. Hopefully, it isn't a trick of photo editing or a camera glitch," although he later suggested it might be some kind of reflection. "It's fun to keep thinking about," he said. *boingboing.net*, 22 Oct 2024.

TROUBLE BREWING

A study of November 2023's Storm Ciarán carried out by meteorologists from the University of Reading discovered that it caused air pressure to drop so low over the town that the temperature at which water boiled fell significantly. Study co-author Caleb Miller said, "As an experimentalist, I saw the opportunity to make some measurements of the properties of boiling water during low atmospheric pressure." He carried out a series of experiments using temperature sensors and a regular electric kettle, which allowed Miller and colleagues to compare previous boiling points measured using similar apparatus. They combined this with data from other sources, including roadside weather stations across southern England and pressure readings from the Reading University Atmospheric Observatory. The researchers found that the storm reduced air pressure so much that water boiled at 98°C (208.4°F), well below the 100°C (212°F) recommended as the optimum temperature for brewing tea, leading Miller to conclude that the Reading area, and probably most of the south of England, suffered from substandard cups of tea on the morning of the storm. Their barometer reading of 956.0 millibars was the lowest pressure recorded since a reading of 952.1 millibars taken in February 1989, which, in turn, was the lowest since 946 millibars recorded in December 1821. *theguardian.com*, 16 Jul 2024.

APOCALYPSE NOW?

On 10 October anyone consulting their BBC weather app may have been alarmed by the results. It claimed that there would be temperatures in excess of 400°C (752°F) in Nottingham, while London would be beset by "hurricane force" winds and those elsewhere would top 15,583mph (25,078kph/h). BBC Weather pre-



sender and meteorologist Simon King swiftly took to X to admit that there was a problem with the app that may have caused "some confusion" and to reassure users that it was being sorted out. His fellow BBC broadcast meteorologist Matt Taylor went on to explain "There's been a data glitch between our suppliers and the app/online," adding "No need to panic buy plywood and candles." *news.sky.com*, 10 Oct 2024.

DAMNED DISPLAY

It is rare that any of the phenomena from Charles Fort's books left behind material evidence, and rarer still that it survives to this day. In *Book of the Damned* Fort refers to a rain of meat from

ABOVE: The strange pillar in the clouds above the Thai city of Ubon Ratchathani. **LEFT:** A preserved sample of the flakes of meat that fell on Bath County, Kentucky, in March 1876, a phenomenon recorded in Fort's *Book of the Damned*.

Kentucky and it seems that some of this meat was preserved at the State's Transylvania University. This is now being shown at the Bath County History Museum, near where it fell, where a display commemorating the event has opened. On 3 March 1876, a Mrs Crouch, from Olympia in Bath County, was making soap on her porch when she started to see flakes of red meat falling from above, continuing for several minutes between 11am and midday, ending up covering a 100-by-50-yard (90-by-45-metre) area. "They gathered up what was remaining, and they say it was a horse wagon full, and I think everyone knows what that means, and I think people in the area ate it," said Professor Kurt Gohde from Transylvania University. People who tasted it suggested it was lamb or deer meat; others thought it had been vomited up by a flock of buzzards, who, according to a local source, "seeing one of their companions disgorge himself, immediately followed suit", but there were also claims it was a cyanobacteria known as Nostoc, or possibly dried fungus. Fort speculated that such falls result from conflict between huge space

creatures: "A thing the size of the Brooklyn Bridge. It's alive in outer space – something the size of Central Park kills it." A sample of the substance analysed shortly after the fall by Dr Allan McLane Hamilton of the Newark Scientific Association rather chillingly concluded that it was lung tissue from either a horse or a human infant, "the structure of the organ in these two cases being almost identical". A DNA analysis of the substance carried out recently for the exhibition has proved inconclusive, so the exact nature of the "meat fall" remains a mystery. *boingboing.net*, 21 Aug 2024.

FROM AGOBARD TO MGT

In the ninth century, Saint Agobard, rationalist Bishop of Lyon in France, wrote about his conflicts with local peasants who believed other states were using magicians to send hail to destroy their crops. Similar beliefs persisted until very recently. In 1984, Hungarian peasant ethnologists Lamell and Nagy documented farmers' tales of how destructive storms could be diverted to forests if the rain could be converted to Christianity. Now, it seems, such beliefs remain alive and well in the US, with technology substituted for magic. After hurricanes Helen and Milton devastated southern States, Georgia senator, conspiracy theorist and fervent Trump acolyte Marjorie Taylor Greene, previously known for blaming forest fires on "Jewish Space Lasers", took to X to announce "Yes, 'they' control the climate. It's ridiculous for anyone to lie and say it can't be done," conveniently leaving the identity of "they" and the methods used to the readers' imagination. This was taken seriously enough to prompt a swift denial from President Biden. Weather control conspiracies remain widespread; in 2018 an Iranian official claimed that Israel was "stealing the clouds and snow" from the country, but while some Governments, such as the Chinese, do sometimes try to use cloud seeding to encourage rain, there's no evidence that they have any other technology that can change the weather. *Le Temps (Geneva)*, 16 Oct 2024.

LEGENDARY WEEKEND 2024 | ALAN MURDIE enjoys a conference overflowing with watery lore

If folklore as a discipline enjoys a fringe festival, then the Folklore Society's annual Legendary Weekend is it. Taking place over the weekend of 31 August to 1 September, the theme this year was 'Water in Legend and Tradition'. Convened in the nave of the former St Peter's by the Waterfront Church in Ipswich, Suffolk (a town needful of some re-enchantment), the floor was "open to anyone – folklorists, healers, hydrologists, bargees, dowers and storytellers". A 20-minute slot was available for each participant to lecture, tell a story or perform a song, "whether... into holy wells or woe waters, hauntings or hydro-mancy", with contributions welcome "on eerie ponds, inland mermaids, canal culture, early spas, baptismal customs, lake monsters, and the lore of fords, falls, fountains, floods and fish pools".

Accordingly, a series of contributors, all backlit by stained-glass windows in what was once the chapel of Cardinal Wolsey's college, proceeded to variously inform, entertain and even alarm us in sharing how diverse peoples in other times and places perceived the element covering 75 per cent of our planet.

Saturday morning began with FT columnist Simon Young sharing findings from his mapping of freshwater mermaids and lake ladies in Britain. Analysis shows an east-west sectorial divide; those found in westerly districts, such as the Kinder Scout mermaid of Derbyshire, are benign, with people recorded for decades trailing up to the Peakland lake where she was said to manifest on Easter morning. In contrast, those in eastern counties are evil, dragging people into watery graves. Simon dubs these 'drowners', and believes they merit further research.

North of the border, another survey being conducted by Stephen Miller reveals that



"The revival of interest in folklore is a wonderful thing"



the dangers in Scottish waters come from the ravenous kelpie or water horse. The tradition is first recorded from the sixth century in the life of St Columba, who exorcised a kelpie that had killed a Pict and attacked a follower. From this beginning, kelpie stories expanded and evolved to function as entertaining tales and a means of discouraging people from venturing near deep water or succumbing to tempting allurements. In numerous stories, seductive kelpies (or water bulls) beguile hapless victims into climbing upon their backs, only for them to be carried away into the water. These individuals are then devoured whole by the kelpie, save for their livers and entrails which are washed ashore afterwards (well, I've never been keen on liver myself).

Fortunately, separating these

BELOW: Gail-Nina Anderson delivering a talk at the 2024 Legendary Weekend in the former St Peter's by the Waterfront Church in Ipswich. **FACING PAGE:** Conference attendees take in the sights of the Ipswich waterfront.

two instalments of watery terrors came a diverting lecture by Dr Gail-Nina Anderson. Her talk, "The Bathing Lady: Visualising Narratives of Women, Water and Why We Shouldn't Look", traced simultaneously alluring and moralistic or magical images of bathing women found in a variety of mediæval religious, Renaissance and early modern artistic works. These range from a calendar in a 15th century Book of Hours to a now lost work by Jan van Eyck. Imagery was influenced by classical notions, biblical stories like that of Bathsheba, the ritual of baptism and folk magic. Punishment might follow voyeurism, but later depictions of alluring bare-breasted mermaids and nude water spirits evaded censure on the basis of their non-human or super-human natures.

Following this was a revelatory talk by artist and PhD student Katie Marlan, concerning the Dobhar-Chú, a monstrous Irish water creature, part-dog, part otter (see FT168:40-45), and "of a black slimy skin", to quote a 17th century description. It once reputedly interacted with people at the remote Glenade Lake in the northwest of Ireland. (At this point, I began recalling the 'super-otter' theories of cryptozoology postulated as the explanation for lake monster sightings). Still visible are two ancient gravestones commemorating the Dobhar-Chú's visitations, including one in which it dismembered a local woman and left only her ravaged torso. One of the pair of surviving stones, though heavily eroded, still bears to this day a crude engraving of the beast.

Easing us back to comfort after a morning filled with sexual themes, monsters and horror was an uplifting pre-luncheon performance by folk singer Liz

Over, a compilation of water songs from the Sussex cliffs and beyond. We were treated to a selection of alternately poignant and rousing songs and sea-shanties, amplified by favourable church acoustics.

The afternoon session commenced with more stories of temptation from the depths. In “A Water Spirit or the Devil in Disguise: The Neck in Swedish and Norwegian Folk Traditions” Tommy Kuusela undertook an in-depth examination of the *nacken* (‘water beast’), a trickster entity that takes the guise of a fiddler, a handsome young man or a horse. Lurking near lakes and rivers, its goal is seducing and ensnaring innocent Swedish maidens.

An alternative pastime for the Devil, giants and other beings was forging lakes and geological features in the Southern Baltic lowlands, as detailed by Robert Piotrowski. His talk demonstrated the existence of an extraordinary variety of pools, mounds and rocks, even whole islands and peninsulas, as well as smaller Devil’s bogs and Devil’s dykes, all ascribed to civil engineering feats carried out by the Devil or other primordial titans once active in the region. Additionally, Robert has compiled an area database listing some 1,400 other supernatural entities. Earth mysteries aficionados have a new world to explore here.

Next came Sophia Kingshill, author of *Mermaids* (2015; see FT332:38-41) plunging into the symbolic, religious and folk meanings of inland wetlands, and their status as liminal landscapes. Nowadays, we may see them as vital ecological reserves and carbon sinks, but in pre-Christian times, swamps and marshes represented portals to the world beyond and, from what can be inferred from traces and treatment of immersed ‘bog-bodies’, served as sacrificial sites. Swamps have long been feared as supernaturally dangerous places, haunted by demonic entities like Grendel and his infamous mother in *Beowulf*, leading Sophia to coin for us a new category, the ‘mire-maid’!

After coffee, a change of style and delivery followed as the renowned professional Scottish



storyteller Allison Galbraith, author of *Lanarkshire Folktales* (2017), regaled us with stories of mermaids and their interactions with the human world along the River Clyde. These once circulated widely, along with three miracle stories involving early saints. Her re-telling provided an apt reminder of how such lore was originally transmitted and experienced by audiences dwelling as they did within a vibrant oral culture, free of scholarly overlays.

Concluding Saturday, Joel Conn further lightened our mood through an amusing sampling and inspection of folktales concerning fools or extraordinarily trusting, gullible or unobservant folk attempting to catch the reflection of the Moon when it appears in a barrel or bucket of water. The folly of trying to grasp ephemeral and intangible images resonates in Jewish traditions stemming from the Yiddish tales of ‘the Wise Men of Chelm’ and more widely as a cross-cultural fable, metaphor and joke still thriving today.

On Sunday morning, George Monger related a 50-year search for the truth of a mysterious ‘suicide pool’ reputedly existing in Epping Forest and some other phantom maidens and haunted pools and rivers in Suffolk. This came before a scheduled talk by Celia Rose, “A Fishy Tale: Mermaids and Sirens in Victorian Art”, examining depictions of gender in mermen and women,

chilly sounding ‘North Sea-Sirens’ and Women’s suffrage imagery. Unfortunately, she was unable to appear, but Gail Nina-Anderson stepped in, providing a commentary on the stimulating slides.

Rounding off matters before lunch came Jeremy Harte, delivering a polished talk on the history of votive deposits – coins, pins or precious objects thrown into ponds, rivers, wells or the ocean for luck. Traditions certainly existed in antiquity, as evidenced by archaeological finds, but establishing an unbroken historical continuity for formal or informal ceremonies up to today is problematic. Nonetheless, one was left with the feeling that the urge to throw precious and shining objects into a body of water in the hope of attracting good fortune or to appease some hostile power arises from a deep-rooted and persistent compulsion within human beings, existing upon a subconscious level.

This was a good prelude for a Sunday afternoon guided walk of Ipswich’s harbour heritage, highlighting ancient remnants of the port surviving next to vaulting modern edifices, including the University of Suffolk, luxury flats and a yacht-filled marina. Here and there are fragmentary traces of the lives of communities among whom folk stories and superstitions were once shared as a matter of course. But the march of time and the triumph of market

forces meant their replacement with ubiquitous modern multi-million-pound constructions that sever all ties with the past and the locality. Whether this new order of large-scale civic and corporate investment represents the latest social equivalent of collectively chucking money into water (or down the drain) to attract future blessings and prosperity, we wisely omitted exploring.

I have condensed the fascinating contributions of this weekend here and left out the questions and discussions that followed on. Reflecting upon the presentations, I was struck by how many revolved around the theme of supernatural presences lurking in water, especially female ones, with mermaids as the standout category.

Of course, it is a trite observation that water is a symbol of both the unconscious mind and of femininity. With the growing stresses of climatic instability and rising seas, amid contested discourses and attacks upon the very concepts of women and womanhood, I was left wondering if this interest may reflect some stirring in the sea of popular consciousness, perhaps an assertion of old archetypes...

Back in 1999, I would have scoffed at the notion of demons making any comeback in the mindset of Western societies. A quarter of a century on, growing numbers of Americans seriously ascribe hauntings to demonic infestations. If not the kraken waking, could this interest be the first ripple signalling the female siren or mermaid is again rising to the surface of the collective unconscious and clearing her throat for a return?

With these thoughts in mind, it was time to leave St Peter’s by the Waterfront and head off into the Suffolk countryside in search of some other fortaean gems: the statue of a monkey with a urine flask on the roof of St Mary the Virgin at Bramford and then on to the possible resting place of the infamous Naked Ghost of Rattlesden. But I will not be surprised if folklorists and forteans will be heading to the water’s edge again before long, following this illuminating Legendary Weekend.



More UFOs over Washington

NIGEL WATSON considers recent official hearings and reports on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena

EXPOSING THE TRUTH

The Congressional UAP hearing, held on 13 November 2024, was rather optimistically entitled, “Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Exposing the Truth.” Did they finally reveal all about our alien overlords or at least offer a glimpse of an alien body or a piece of extraterrestrial hardware?

Nancy Mace, Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation, stated the hearing was “intended to help Congress and the American people to learn the extent of the programs and activities our Government has engaged in with respect to UAPs – and what knowledge it has yielded. That includes, of course, any knowledge of extraterrestrial life or technology of non-human origin.”

Glenn Grothman, Chairman of the Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs hoped that “our witnesses today will be able to provide evidence and content that is worthwhile in our pursuits of eliminating Government waste and increasing transparency.”

The main witnesses were UAP promoter Luis Elizondo, retired US Navy Rear Admiral Tim Gallaudet, journalist Michael Shellenberger and ex-NASA official Michael Gold. Blogger Jason Colavito was not impressed, noting “the witness list is a grab-bag of people infamous for being wrong, spreading untrue claims, and being embedded in the supernatural hijinks at Skinwalker Ranch. This is not a serious inquiry into UFOs but a canonisation of the Skinwalker Ranch mythology as Government ideology.”

Shellenberger rolled out the story of the alleged “Immaculate Constellation” document. This is an 11-page anonymously sourced report about secret UAP investigations conducted since 2018.

“What the American people need to know,” claimed Shellenberger, “is that the US military and intelligence community are sitting on a huge amount of visual and other information: still photos, video, photos, other sensor information, and they have for a very long time.”

The Immaculate Constellation document sounds very reminiscent of the MJ12 hoax that promoted the idea of a secret group who were put together to study the Roswell incident and to be on standby to retrieve and study spaceships dropping from our skies.

Gallaudet claimed that in 2017 “satellite imagery” captured a UAP and that it was illegally hidden from Congress. He went on to say that UFO whistle-blowers and witnesses



ABOVE: Michael Shellenberger brandishes a copy of the ‘Immaculate Constellation’ document at the Congressional UAP hearing, 13 November 2024.

have been ridiculed and debunked, and that: “Elements of the Government are engaging in a disinformation campaign.” That presumably includes any official who does not believe the UAP supporters’ fantastic stories and is in opposition to his belief that “We’re being visited by non-human intelligence with technology we really don’t understand and with intentions we don’t understand either.”

Gold finds it “disconcerting when members of the academic community are vilified for even having the temerity to attempt to study UAP.” He also felt that scientists, pilots and other UAP witnesses often faced “negative consequences to their career.”

Elizondo, questioned by Mace, confirmed that the US had retrieved non-terrestrial material in the 1950s, and that there had been attempts to reverse-engineer alien technology. Asked about biological material, Elizondo said he was more of a “nuts and bolts” man but believed alien bodies had been recovered. Did he mean Roswell? Of course, his only evidence was that he knew that this was true but could not obtain the clearances from departments or officials who could confirm this for certain. It was like watching a slippery eel on the end of a hook

After the hearing, Mace wondered: “Who’s behind it all? And is the Pentagon – is anything being hid from the Pentagon too? So I just, you know, we need more whistle-blowers. We need more time to truly get to the bottom of it. But what we saw today was huge. This was bombshell revelations about what potentially is there.”

The hearing simply repeated stories and beliefs that are already well known, and the only “bombshell revelation” was the Immaculate Constellation document. Mace’s key weasel word is “potentially.”

Amateur astronomer Tim Prinity of SUNlite website fame notes: “UFO proponents are a lot like many US politicians... They... believe they are infallible and, even when they are wrong, they go into name-calling (debunkers!!!!) and proclaim that those coming up with an explanation are not looking at the data correctly. It is my observation that UFO proponents that champion a specific case treat it as if it is ‘the ring to rule them all’ (my precious!) and cannot possibly admit the case is something earthly no matter what evidence is presented (see Maccabee - Gulf Breeze and Randle et al. - Roswell for a few examples).”

Sadly, yet another light of reason is fading, as Prinity says he plans to stop regularly updating his SUNlite newsletter in 2025. oversight.house.gov/hearing/unidentified-anomalous-phenomena-exposing-the-truth/; oversight.house.gov/release/mace-grothman-open-joint-hearing-on-unidentified-anomalous-phenomena/; mace.house.gov/immaculateconstellation; www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/; www.astronomyufo.com/UFO/SUNlite.htm

REALITY CHECK

On 19 November 2024, Jon T Kosloski, director of the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), gave their annual status report before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Here he reiterated the contents of AARO’s “Fiscal Year 2024 Consolidated Annual Report on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena”, which noted they received 485 UAP reports for the period 1 May 2023 to 1 June 2024, and 272 outside that time frame. Out of all the 757 cases, 49 have been identified, 243 are pending closure, 444 had insufficient data to analyse and 21 are undergoing further study. The majority of sightings were of lights in the sky (65%) and balloons were the main culprits for the 49 identified cases (70%).

AARO coordinates with many other organisations to collect data and has set up a prototype sensor system, GREMLIN, for detecting, tracking, and characterising UAP.

They have found nothing to support the sensational stories of the whistle-blowers, but did confirm they “will provide immediate notification to Congress should AARO identify that any cases indicate or involve a breakthrough foreign adversarial aerospace capability.” media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/14/2003583603/-1/-1/0/FY24-CONSOLIDATED-ANNUAL-REPORT-ON-UAP-508.PDF



Words matter

JENNY RANGLES wonders just how much of our understanding of UFOs is shaped by language

We take words for granted – so much so that sometimes we fail to see the context that they convey. This is especially true of UFOs. Those three letters have already created in your mind a picture of what I am talking about. You are likely to see a disc-shaped craft, flying or landing, and you may even have conjured up some small entities standing next to it. Cultural influences may shift what you were envisaging a little but, by and large, what you imagined will be much the same for most people reading this article.

Words have power to shape our reality, and that is a momentous but often overlooked factor in how we perceive these phenomena. We name what we see, and if that name sticks with other people, then they see what has been named. The social impact of the words that we have chosen is little considered as something that has given birth to much of the mystery. They can and have become a template for belief over the years.

Yes, there is an underpinning reality to UFOs, and we are right to investigate the true meaning of what is being reported. But we may forget that a description is often based on assumptions made by others. So we don't ask the first question we should.

That first question is: was the 'object' the witness tells you they saw even airborne? Because almost by default a broadly disc-shaped machine that is beyond comprehension is given that modern context, even if by mistake. It may be on the ground or stationary in the sky, so not 'flying' at all; it may look only vaguely like a saucer or, indeed, nothing like one at all – but we apply the term to any unexplained shape. And 'unidentified' refers only to the witness in that moment on that day. Seen from any other angle or in daylight, it might have been identified much more easily.

We rarely apply the truth that perception is context-driven to a UFO 'sighting', but it can often be the key to the entire event.

The case that taught me that lesson long ago involved an elderly woman who described seeing a 'spacecraft' that landed near her home. After watching it for a few minutes, she saw several 'beings' moving around in front of it. Her eyes got sore, so she had to look away before it vanished. Several facts resolved this case quite rapidly. The woman needed spectacles but was not wearing them during her sighting. The Moon was nearly full, and setting. Anyone staring at it, even without eyesight



I am sure that most witnesses tell the truth and that odd events have happened as described

problems, might have seen optical artefacts. There were clouds.

Investigation quickly established the almost certain truth here, but in many instances the facts are more complex or key data are unavailable, and so a belief that another UFO event has occurred persists. Then, as human nature decrees, the tale grows with the telling.

This is why timely investigation matters, and from day one the assumption of every investigator must be that the case has a mundane explanation. Because decades of experience tell us the vast majority of sightings do not turn out to be exotic at all.

We can also apply the test of history to this principle and look back to the days before flying saucers or aliens were part of the cultural landscape.

Events such as someone seeing the Moon and not recognising it because of eye problems will have occurred for centuries. What happened in the past in such a scenario? The same stimulus could be perceived as a witch on a broomstick flying over a hill. Or any other item from local folklore. In the Isle of Man, they have rich tales built from Norse and Celtic lore. Here stories were told that today we might well interpret as alien encounters and not attribute to the many unique 'magical' beings that populate Manx history.

One such is the fenodyree (**FT340:52-53**). One of its most interesting features is that farmers on this storm-battered island believed this being was able to mow their fields of grain in circles. Finding your field in that condition is easy to attribute to magic (especially centuries ago). Yet notice what

LEFT: The Hertfordshire 'Mowing Devil' of 1683 – a non-Manx fenodyree or proto-circlemaker?

this reminds you of today: crop circles. These oddities turned up in the early 1980s and for a decade or so entertained the world. Although today there are those who still consider these events were paranormal, the more rational view is that they were mostly the work of lots of artistically-inclined humans jumping on a bandwagon, plus some extreme weather, perhaps related to localised whirlwinds. There is a good argument that in the prelude to the famous Todmorden police-car 'abduction' such an event left swirl patterns on the wet highway, which suggests that a localised, unusual weather event may have played a part in this close encounter. A modern fenodyree.

I am 100 per cent sure that most witnesses tell the truth, and that some very odd events have happened as described. Yet the 'alien' context that modern society has constructed around cases like this needs to be separated from the physical causes that first triggered the event.

It is so easy to view everything in just the context of today. But the human history of observing 'strange things' is long and varied, and seeing UFOs as alien craft needs to be considered in a much wider timeframe. All through history, the interpretations that are ascribed to strange events are usually weirder than what emerges when science catches up and understands the truth.

There is little reason to assume that UFOs should be any different. What I think we can say with assurance is that the presumption of a singular cause – such as "UFOs are aliens on survey missions" – is not what primarily – perhaps ever – modern UFOs truly are. Rather, they are out-of-context misinterpretations of a myriad odd events in human history, which bit by bit our expanding knowledge has allowed us to unravel correctly. In some ways the best legacy that the UFO mystery can leave us is that revelation. For other rare natural anomalies may be understood in the future because human beings love a mystery and so investigate. Our inquisitive nature is the reason we have become the dominant species on this planet. If UFOs are no more than a modern example of that age-old path – using the right words to ask big questions that generate rather less dramatic answers – then it is worth realising that wonder leads to enquiry and discovery, and imagination ends in understanding.

WOW!

KING OF THE STRANGE

Who is the most fortean musical icon of all time? Elvis Presley, of course, who was born 90 years ago this month on 8 January 1935.

NEIL NIXON argues that while the living Elvis brought religious iconography and supernatural power to rock 'n' roll, his post-mortem career since 1977 has encompassed ever wider realms of weirdness, from angels and aliens to reincarnation and conspiracy theories...



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When giving talks on UFOs I'm sometimes asked which single event offers the best evidence for intelligent alien life. Until the recent preprint report from the Planetary Habitability Laboratory concluding that the Wow! signal was an explicable, if rare, event in astrophysics (see **FT421:6**), I tended to trot out that example, and then segue into a question. The Wow! signal was detected at 10.16pm on 15 August 1977: I would ask audiences what Earth-shattering event dominated the following day's news.¹

The answer, of course, is the

death of Elvis Presley, which prompted me to point out that Elvis's death probably occurred around 12 hours from the Wow! signal's appearance; and in the absence of any definitive answer to what the signal was, the notion that it was the space brothers calling the singer home was as good an explanation as any. This wasn't a totally original joke: in a scene from the first *Men in Black* movie agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) informs Agent J (Will Smith) "Elvis is not dead, he just went home," while the King's version of the Chuck Berry classic "Promised Land" plays on the car stereo.

These may not be the strangest claims ever made about

ABOVE: Elvis shows off his moves at a concert in St Petersburg, Florida, 1956. **FACING PAGE:** The King in his pomp in *Aloha From Hawaii*, 1973.

Elvis, but they are indicative of the way the King's image and example are now so malleable that few claims are off limits and even those at the outer edges of credibility find the supporters and "evidence" they require to survive. Perhaps it was the Wow! signal that marked the start of such claims: after all, you'd have to be extremely literal-minded to suggest Elvis's career stopped on the day he died. In most of the ways we'll explore in this article, that's when it started.





Judge Tells Elvis Presley To Clean Up Act—Or Else

JACKSON, Fla., Aug. 10 (INS)—The threatening arm of the law took some of the “rock” and a lot of the “roll” out of Elvis Presley’s song-and-bump routine in Jacksonville today.

Juvenile Judge Marion W. Gooding warned Elvis (The Pelvis) before the first of his six scheduled appearances at the Florida Theater to either clean up his act or answer to the court.

Just to make sure the snakehipped singer followed his instruc-

to determine whether Judge Gooding was standing by with the hook.

Parker denied Presley had altered his actions, declaring “There’s nothing to change.” He said the judge had read some unfavorable publicity Elvis had received in certain towns, but apparently had not read the “rave” notices he received in others.

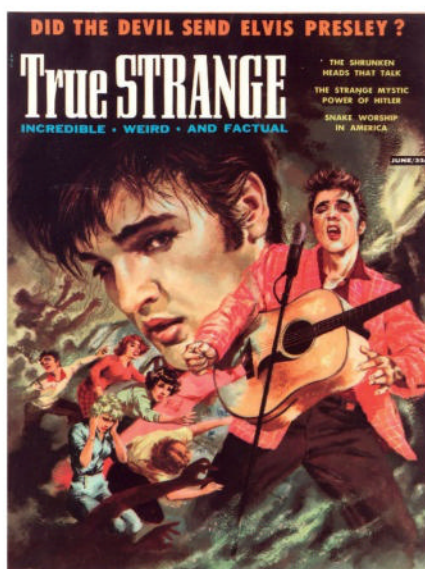
The over 2,000 teenagers who caught Elvis’ act today apparently adore their hero even when he merely vibrates instead of rocks.

ABOVE LEFT: Sam Philips and Elvis in Memphis, 1956. **ABOVE RIGHT:** In August 1956 Jacksonville’s Judge Marion W. Gooding threatened Elvis with legal action for the impairment of the morals of minors. **BELOW:** In June 1957 *True Strange* tapped into the hysteria around the singer, asking: “Did the Devil send Elvis Presley?”

RELEASING THE POWER

Elvis sits third on Wikipedia’s list of “Best Selling Music Artists,” the claimed record sales – 500 million – being equal to Michael Jackson in second place; Jackson is ahead because the figure for certified sales in his case is much higher than for Elvis. Presley’s first release was in 1954, his first national chart hits in 1956 and much of his best-selling career occurred when sales records existed on paper and the industry’s approach to accuracy depended on whether the figures were going to chart compilers or tax inspectors. This cavalier attitude also extended across the industry, because nobody involved with Elvis’s generation of performers seriously believed they were creating sounds or artists that would be revered a quarter of the way into the 21st century. Rock ‘n’ roll fired up the industry largely because it offered opportunities to record cheaply and sell massively: four or five musicians captured live in the studio could turn in a million-selling single. Indeed, the half-dozen musicians on Elvis’s first US No 1, “Heartbreak Hotel” (1956), verges on overkill by the standards of the time. Hillbilly (country) music and “race” music (rhythm and blues) had set benchmarks for low-budget recording for niche audiences, so when rock n roll took the same tactics to mass sales, fortunes beckoned. Given the volatility of the situation, those included a fair smattering of chancers or professionals seasoned in fringe markets and looking for the main chance. Two of these – Sam Philips and Tom Parker – would play a massive role in making Elvis a star. There was no serious criticism or scholarship devoted to popular music at the time, so our understanding of the strange, almost occult power Elvis unleashed in these early days depends largely on understanding a wealth of circumstantial evidence.

Memphis-based record producer Sam Philips famously commented on how the niches in the race and hillbilly markets might be broken when he stated: “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion



REVEREND ROBERT GRAY OFFERED UP PRAYERS FOR ELVIS PRESLEY’S SALVATION

dollars.” It’s a comment that cuts to the heart of the mystical power some would identify in Elvis’s early work and one widely misunderstood and misrepresented. The infamous Albert Goldman Elvis biography presented Philips’s comment in an altered form with the addition of a racial slur – a point that riled Elvis scholar Greil Marcus, who argued: “Sam Philips was one of the great pioneers of racial decency... and in the Fifties, in Memphis, he was ostracized for it... Philips ran the only permanent recording facility in Memphis and had opened it solely to record black musicians.” Marcus spoke to Philips’s secretary and assistant Marion Keisker who stated, “I never heard Sam use the word... nothing could be more out of character.”²

RCA records initially regretted stumping

up \$35,000 to sign a local hero, in November 1955; by the time “Heartbreak Hotel” hit No 1 in the US the following May, they’d changed their minds. Within a year, his first album was well on the way to becoming RCA’s biggest selling LP, Elvis was a national sensation, and the responses included statements suggesting he’d released primal forces.

For example, in Jacksonville, Florida, Elvis was denounced in a sermon on “Hotrods, Reefers and Rock ‘n’ Roll” at Trinity Baptist Church, and Judge Marion Gooding had prepared an arrest warrant for Presley charging him with impairing the morals of minors. Elsewhere in town, the Reverend Robert Gray, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, offered up prayers for Presley’s salvation after declaring that Elvis had “achieved a new low in spiritual degeneracy.”³ To be fair to Jacksonville, they had a point. At a concert there in 1955 when Elvis was still learning to control his live power, he joked he’d see his female fans backstage afterwards. Many of them tried to take him up on the offer.

Such serious research as exists on this period looks at the way the unprecedented success of rock ‘n’ roll, and the hysteria unleashed by Elvis in particular, caused a blurring of racial boundaries and a release of pent-up sexuality at a time when the surging prosperity of the USA had put spending power in the hands of teenagers on a hitherto unimagined scale. The resulting moral panic was understandable. A paper considering the changing perceptions of Elvis in national magazines during the first decade of his national fame cites the observation of James and Annette Baxter that Elvis was “as amused as they [his audience] were... by his idiotic power to hypnotise.”⁴ The “power” in question changed in terms of its intent and moral standing depending on the perspective of the viewer, though it was something a mature Elvis controlled effectively for much of his live career. An insight of a different kind arrives on the album *Recorded Live on Stage in Memphis* (1974). A typical show at



PHILLIP HARRINGTON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A dream-like photo of Elvis besieged by female fans backstage after a performance at the University of Dayton Fieldhouse, Dayton, Ohio, 27 May 1956. BELOW: Larry Geller, Elvis's hairdresser-cum-spiritual advisor, shared his memories of the King's journey toward enlightenment in a 1989 book.

that time opened with *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, "See See Rider" and "I Got a Woman". Between the latter two Elvis encounters a female fan, already verging on hysterics. Written down, the ensuing exchange in which he suggests she has laryngitis and mimics her voice looks derogatory; listened to, though, it's an act of compassion and an expression of mutual love that amounts to Elvis asking her, and – by implication – the other adoring fans – how it came to this. With the distance of 20 years from the start of his career, he's clearly in control of a power few performers have experienced.

ELVIS DIVIDED

Between the moral panic period and the triumphant days of the early Vegas years, Elvis made 31 movies, many of which are now widely derided, and two well received documentaries chronicling his return to live work. Superficial histories note the declining critical and commercial fortunes of the period, but it remains crucial to the paranormal fascination around Elvis because it was his increasing estrangement from his work that drove him to a greater spiritual questioning. Business wasn't as bad as some suggest, although corners were cut, including completing the infamous *Kissin' Cousins* (with a saving on the budget for lead actors by having Elvis play two roles) "in less than two-and-a-half weeks at a total cost of 1.3 million dollars, about a third of what the likes of *Blue Hawaii* had cost."⁵

A significant meeting at the time occurred when Larry Geller deputised for Elvis's regular hairdresser and their conversations about spirituality started a working relationship that saw Geller added to Elvis's entourage; he was soon acting as a confidante, spiritual advisor and provider of a wealth of fortune

reading material. Geller was one of several former insiders who went into print in the wake of Elvis's death; his *If I Can Dream* (1989) remains a rich seam of material for all students of Elvis-related strangeness. To Geller "of all the charges levelled against Elvis, the most ridiculous and unfair is that he was a stupid man."⁶ Geller's book is also the primary source for the most significant moment on Elvis's own spiritual journey, an incident that occurred near Flagstaff, Arizona. Presley's entourage were driving from Memphis to Hollywood on 5 March 1965, to begin work on *Harum Scarum*. Elvis had previously complained to Geller that all the reading and meditating hadn't produced a life-changing spiritual experience for him; but with Elvis driving the bus, Geller alongside and the assorted Memphis Mafia in the back, things suddenly changed. Elvis became fixated on a cloud. "He was slumped back in his seat, slack-jawed... From the cloud emerged a clear, definite... image." Singer and confidante both beheld the image of Joseph Stalin in the cloud, an experience that took Elvis closer to God (in some accounts, Stalin's visage morphed into that of Christ). Geller wrote: "I knew we had witnessed something extraordinary," and noted that the experience left Elvis with "the look of the newly baptized." Elvis interpreted the event as God revealing his power, and it renewed his existing faith: "I love God so much, I'm filled with divine love." But surrounded by the sceptical Memphis Mafia, who hadn't experienced the same thing, the incident also heightened a tension in which Elvis was "torn between

exhilaration and dread."⁷

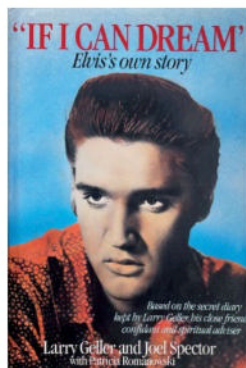
The same division was evident in the gap between Elvis's own thoughts and his work. *Harum Scarum* drew scathing reviews, with the *New York Times* observing that Elvis "wanders through the improbable whimsies... with all the animation of a man under deep sedation, but then he had read the script... Every line of dialogue sounds like a song cue, and about every other one actually is."⁸

BETWEEN THE LINES

Larry Geller's account of the 5 March incident concludes with Elvis's assertion that he can't make "another fucking film" and Geller counselling caution and recognising Elvis "had come so far, and yet in one crucial way he was stuck."⁹ An insight to the years of deep frustration and soul searching that followed is

provided in one of the strangest items of Presleyana ever produced. *Elvis Between The Lines* (2023) collects and comments on pages annotated by Elvis from various fortune books. The works were previously the property of Sheila Ryan (a girlfriend of Elvis for two years) and her testimony about their relationship chimes with others who experienced the uncanny and spiritual with Elvis: "Elvis had qualities that no other human being has, had, will have. Some of them are so

hard to describe because the charisma, the qualities that he had were almost not of this world... a lot of times, angelic... He knew things that I was feeling before I was feeling them."¹⁰ Elvis frequently gave books, already annotated by him, to close associates. With Larry Geller's help, Elvis had "amassed an



The Wonder of Elvis

Elvis has made countless odd appearances in the pages of FT over the years...

DEMON ELVIS

FT77:15: In 1994 Shirley Fitzgerald, 31, claimed that a demon disguised as Elvis was haunting her flat in Tilson Gardens on the Clapham Park Estate in south London. The apparition first appeared in Shirley's living room where it was seen by her neighbour Josie Corfield, who said: "[I] saw what I thought was Elvis across the sitting room. I started screaming and crying... I couldn't see its eyes. Then it changed into a white figure. It all lasted for about two minutes." Oddly, the demon did not appear to Shirley as a vision of the King; instead she saw a five-month-old foetus hovering in the kitchen and black smoke in the living room. Things calmed down after the flat was blessed by Rev Noel Cooper of nearby All Saints' Church.



how much they love him." He denied that it was a publicity stunt, pointing out that the tears had not dried up even during a heatwave or under the bright lights of television cameras. "They are salty – they are real tears!"

SUMERIAN ELVIS

FT123:12: In 1999 Jukka Ammond, professor of literature at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, who had made two albums of Elvis songs in Latin, announced he was now going to record some of them in Sumerian, a language extinct for some 4,000 years. The first track was to be "Esir Kus Za-gin" – literally "sandals of leather of the colour of a blue gem" – or 'Blue Suede Shoes'.

LARD ELVIS

FT127:16: In 1999, Mark Kemp, a chef in the kitchen of St Margaret's Hospice, Clydebank, sculpted a 3ft (91cm) statue of Elvis, dressed in a rhinestone-encrusted jumpsuit, from lard.



WEeping ELVIS

FT105:22: In 1997 a Dutch Elvis impersonator reported that his souvenir Elvis bust had begun weeping salty tears just days before the 20th anniversary of the King's death on 16 August 1977. Toon Nieuwenhuisen invited the public into his house in the town of Duerne to witness the apparent miracle. "He is crying for his fans all over the world," said Mr Nieuwenhuisen. "He knows



FALLING ELVIS

FT192:20: In June 1996 a member of a club for skydiving Elvis impersonators was killed after being blown off course. Raymond Sayles, 41, died after a jump by The Flying Elvises to publicise the opening of a Boston nightclub. He suffered severe lacerations to his head and chest when he landed away from the designated landing area. Several other Elvises were blown astray by the powerful winds; one was hospitalised after a bad landing while two others ended up in Boston Harbour.

ANCIENT ELVIS

FT241:18: A 13in (33cm) bust with an uncanny resemblance to Elvis was an authentic acroterian – an ornament often found on the corners of sarcophagi. It was dated to between 400 BC and AD 200 and was auctioned at Bonhams on 15 October 2008 for £24,000.

RELIC ELVIS

FT257:9: In October 2009 a large clump of Elvis's hair, believed to have been shorn from the King's scalp in 1958 when

he joined the army, sold for £11,300 at a Chicago auction of memorabilia collected by the late Gary Pepper, President of the Elvis Presley Fan Club.

WINDOW ELVIS

FT276:22: In the first week of January 2011 it was reported that a mysterious image resembling a face had appeared on a window pane of the White Hart Inn in Shropshire. There was much speculation as to the cause of the mark, whether it was on the inside the glass or on its surface, and who or what might be manifesting in this strange fashion. Some suggested it looked like Elvis; others claimed it was the same face that supposedly appears in other pubs in the next county, Herefordshire.

FISH ELVIS

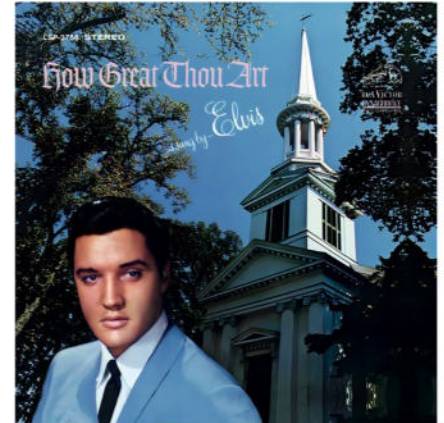
FT309:19: In 2013 a thornback skate *Raja clavata* caught alive in the Solent caused considerable surprise, not only for the fishermen who hooked it but also for the Portsmouth Blue Reef Aquarium's staff who received it shortly afterwards – due to its extra fin. Because this structure resembled a quiff, it was not long before the ray was dubbed 'Elvis'.

BIRD POO ELVIS

FT416:73: In 2022 Lesley Maby sent us this likeness of Elvis captured in a seagull dropping.



TOP: Elvis the thornback skate. **ABOVE LEFT:** The mysterious face in the window of the White Hart Inn. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Lesley Maby's bird poo Elvis simulacrum. **LEFT:** The ancient Elvis acroterian.

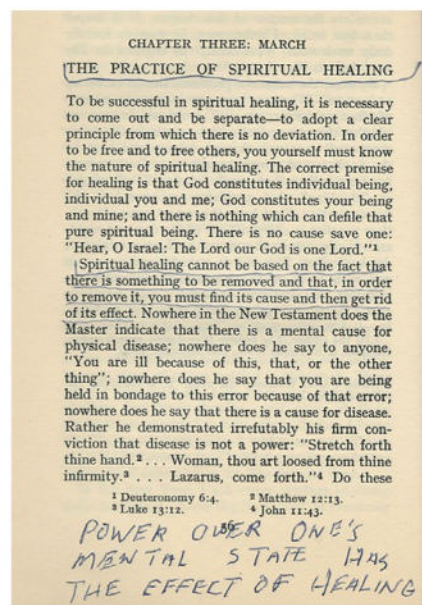


LEFT: Elvis rehearsing with The Sweet Inspirations in 1970; Sylvia Shemwell, a recipient of and believer in his healing powers, is at the far right. ABOVE: Elvis the gospel singer on 1967's *How Great Thou Art*.

impressive library spanning the world's great spiritual, metaphysical, and religious wisdom... [his] search and connection to God was the single most significant aspect of his life and career"¹¹ The annotations provide insights into the way Elvis tracked issues like the battle of good and evil and the possible meanings to be drawn from the impact of his own prodigious talent as he pored over tomes as varied as *Cheiro's Book of Numbers* and the homely anthology *Poems that Touch the Heart*. Significantly, in books annotated for Shelia Ryan, Elvis is frequently preoccupied with the impact of personal actions, noting in his distinctive large script "one can lose everything they have before they even realise it,"¹² and "time will not end until every human wish has been fulfilled."¹³

THE GOSPEL TRUTH

The gulf between the inner Elvis and the plot inanities of movies like *Clambake* (which he once identified as the worst of his output) is massive. Elvis's various film deals were multiple movie affairs, his low budget and dependable fodder providing a guaranteed income stream in the 1960s as studios sweated over declining audience numbers and the threat that television would create a generation with no interest in cinemagoing. Before a live comeback that renewed his sense of purpose, Elvis's greatest spiritual expression was poured into his gospel work, the element of his career that eventually delivered three Grammy Awards. The Pentecostal churches which provided Elvis's fundamental beliefs in spirituality continued to shape his interpretation of everything from his own UFO sightings to spiritual healing. Notably, even the most sceptical observers – his wife Priscilla being a prominent refusenik where his spiritual books and LSD experiments were concerned – are very matter of fact regarding the King's apparent talents in this area. "[Elvis] was capable of spiritual healing; one touch of his hands on my temples and the most painful headaches disappeared."¹⁴ By contrast, Elvis experiencing a spiritual rapture she struggled to see left the down-to-



ABOVE: An annotated page from Elvis's copy of *The Infinite Way Letters* 1958, one of Joel S Goldsmith's guides to practical mysticism.

earth Priscilla seeing only a state-of-the-art sprinkler system in action:

"Do you see them?" Said Elvis...

"See what?..."

"The angels, out there"

"Angels? I asked, looking down at the sprinklers..."

Elvis stared into the water "for a few minutes" before moving towards the patterns he saw and declaring "I have to go." The pragmatic Priscilla wrote years later: "After his death, some of us have discussed those days, bringing up the possibility of a nervous breakdown... more likely it was just a game he had made up out of boredom and depression."¹⁵

A few eyewitness accounts are similarly matter of fact regarding Elvis's various successes at healing, but there are also spectacular claims. None more so than the testimony of Sylvia Shemwell, a member of the Sweet Inspirations gospel quartet who worked

with Elvis during the Vegas years. He called the group "My analysts. If anything goes wrong, I go to their dressing room... close the door and I confess everything to them."¹⁶ Shemwell, who died in 2010, spoke movingly at Elvis Week in 1996 of intimate and dramatic dealings with the singer. In Vegas in 1974 Elvis had noticed she had lost the trademark grin that the backing singers usually had during a show. Shemwell had had "a cancer smear scare" and was due to see five doctors. The night before her appointments, in the backstage area, Elvis shut himself and Shemwell away and, according to Shemwell, "prayed until tears wept". He put his hands on her stomach saying: "Take it away Lord, she's got four babies." Shemwell spoke to Elvis Week in a style suited to an evangelical meeting, the finale being that the doctors the next day discovered she hadn't got cervical cancer. The Elvis Week crowd responded with shouts of "Amen!"¹⁷ Estelle Brown, a fellow Sweet Inspiration, told much the same story about the same event as recently as 2020.

At over 50 years remove it's impossible to know what – if any – difference Elvis made to Shemwell's condition, however the religious faith that underpinned their encounter is beyond dispute and the sense that Elvis's charismatic presence, wherever he was, drew from a collective power familiar to Pentecostal congregations, especially in the poorer areas of the American south, is established in detailed histories of his life. While it was probably advisable to avoid direct discussions of how consciously he sought to manifest black culture, or tried to incorporate religious trappings into his non-gospel work, the circumstantial evidence is dotted throughout his career.

ELVIS MESSIAH

Much of Elvis's power is implicit, and his meanings non-specific, particularly because other than a pair of obscure songs – "That's Someone You'll Never Forget" and "I'll Be Gone" – he isn't known to have written his own material, whatever the song-writing credits might claim. He is, therefore, spared

the posthumous identification with specific song messages that attends the post-death careers of other pop icons like Bob Marley and John Lennon. His message and example are now carried largely by documentary examinations of his work, the official repository of his legacy centred on Graceland, and the detailed and often contradictory eyewitness accounts written by a small army of those claiming some intimate involvement. Elvis left no autobiography or any detailed interview remotely as searching as, say, Lennon's conversations with the editor of *Rolling Stone* or *Playboy* magazine. Consequently, there are disciples of various hues passing on first-hand accounts and followers of all kinds reporting a range of incidents, a situation that bears at least a passing resemblance to the way the message of Jesus emerged in its various forms.

A few decades ago, Ted Harrison wrote the first serious study of this aspect of Elvis culture. Back then, its cover blurb claim that "Perhaps, in 2000 years' time, there will be cathedrals to Elvis"¹⁸ seemed like an audacious attempt to gain attention. Today, if anything, it looks like a conservative forecast given the rich variety of Elvis claims in which the sublime and the ridiculous collide. Superficially, it's easy to dismiss a world in which Spirit Elvis regularly visits people and changes lives while the apparently living Elvis appears randomly all over the US, although a fondness for Kalamazoo, Michigan, is notable. However, the whole surreal circus is driven by a handful of reports that would be familiar to fortune-tellers, albeit because such claims generally belong to other areas of fortune-telling.

Raymond A Moody's *Elvis After Life* (1987) explores strange encounters with The King across a range of established paranormal phenomena. There are premonitions of Elvis's death, encounters with the ghostly Elvis, and a claim that a young boy – Jeremy Morgan – announced himself to his mother Nancy as Elvis's reincarnation. The latter claim was dismissed by Moody on the grounds that "there was little doubt in my mind that Nancy had implanted and encouraged this belief in Jeremy by educating him concerning Elvis Presley."¹⁹ The book's metaphorical money shot is a harder nut to crack for a sceptic. Jennifer, a girl with Downs Syndrome, raised by Elvis fans, attended one concert, aged five. Her health was always compromised and she died in 1980. Her mother told Raymond Moody: "As Jennifer was dying, she seemed to light up. The light looked as though it were coming from within her. She smiled a big smile.

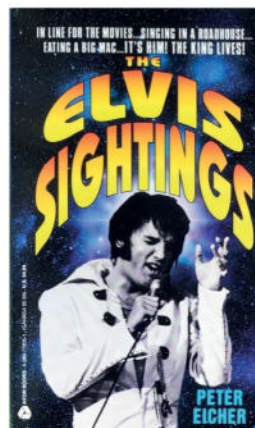
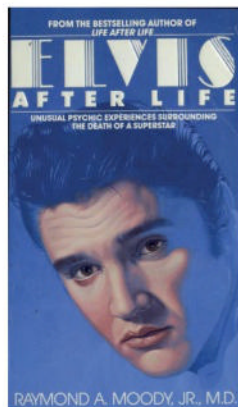


THE SITUATION BEARS A RESEMBLANCE TO THE WAY THE MESSAGE OF JESUS EMERGED

Jimmy and I were hugging her and crying and she tried to sit up in bed. She said, 'Love you Mommy and Dimmy.' Then she said, 'Here comes Elvis.'"²⁰

Jac L Tharpe's introductory essay to an early compilation of Elvis scholarship discusses "interest in Elvis – worship in many cases", the observation being notable because much of the work making up *Elvis: Images and Fancies* (1979) was created while Elvis was still alive. Along with complex readings of his life and work we get claims like that of Liz Dobbins, who briefly experienced incredible power in Elvis's presence, noting: "I don't think there was any person other than Christ himself who could bring about that reaction from a touch of the hand."²¹

By complete contrast, the present-day Facebook page 'Elvis the Man is Alive' attempts to blend pragmatism and regular discussion with the notion that the fragmentary evidence that Elvis faked his own death is now supported by photographs and continued sightings of The King. Anyone already familiar with such beliefs will recognise the strategies employed help keep



LEFT: Rev Dorian Baxter of the Christ the King Graceland Independent Anglican Church of Canada and (inset) Pastor Bob Joyce, who maintains he is definitely not Elvis. BELOW: Elvis's death in 1977 signalled the start of books recording encounters with 'Spirit Elvis' and sightings of a still living Elvis across the world. FACING PAGE: Gail Brewer-Giorio's novel *Orion* fuelled the 'Elvis Lives' idea.

this online community alive; for example, regarding Monte Nicholson's book *The Presley Arrangement* (2023) as a plausible and truthful account, despite the fact that its Amazon page states the "novel is pure entertainment, an enthralling, action-packed drama that will keep you in suspense to the last page – and wondering long after." Whether the author intended to keep people believing long after is another question. Similarly, the attention currently lavished on Pastor Bob Joyce (an individual believed by some to be Elvis) may have impressed many people, but one individual notably unimpressed is Joyce himself.²²

Collectively, I'd argue, this collision of conundrums where Elvis is concerned proves two things beyond doubt. Firstly, there is no clear limit to the market for all things Elvis and strange. In the absence of Elvis himself, all manner of niche beliefs are thriving and the efforts by his legitimate estate and heirs to rein these in are largely futile. Secondly, this is a festival of fortune-telling, if only because we are witnessing in real time the way all manner of odd claims – from conspiratorial to paranormal – take root and flourish.

ELVIS ON THE BORDERLANDS

Elsewhere, Elvis-related strangeness continues to spread, and an outsider's best chance of keeping a grasp on what is out there and why might be to trust the handful of fortune-tellers who have sought to understand some aspects of this. Ted Harrison's two books on the religious aspects of the deceased King – *Elvis People* (1992) and *The Death and Resurrection of Elvis Presley* (2016) – constitute a serious attempt to map the growing phenomenon of Elvis's deification. In the first book, Harrison is clear about religious meanings being choices on the part of those involved; for example, Kiki Apostolakis (a Greek woman who moved to Memphis

after Elvis died and spent her life in devotional acts in his memory) "believes" her purpose is "Being close to Elvis".²³

Similarly, Harrison is clear that the claim a space shuttle mission saw "Elvis's kindly face... in the stars of the night sky" as it landed is a "folk legend".²⁴ In 2016, like many scholars mining the same material more recently, Harrison was fascinated by the growth of the Elvis cult; one simple piece of strangeness was a mathematical calculation based on the exponential growth of Elvis tribute artists suggest-

ing that by the year 2043 there will be more Elvis impersonators than there are people on Earth!²⁵

Audiences may enjoy the tributes because they keep alive a priceless song catalogue; elsewhere, however, Elvis scholarship sometimes amounts to a small industry within which the music can seem secondary. Many Elvis fans are, at best, ambivalent about the endless trawling of Presleyana in this way, but the existence of so much weighty investigation is testament to how many meanings, and how much material, scholars can draw from. Roughly a decade separates John Strasbaugh's *E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith* (1995) from Gregory Reece's unapologetically titled *Elvis Religion* (2006). Where Strasbaugh notes that Elvis "did leave a sizeable amount of anecdotal material from which the faithful can build a figure of veneration,"²⁶ Reece trawls popular culture including art, fictional representations of Elvis and countless tabloid stories frequently dragging Elvis into conspiratorial and paranormal territory, but unites these with the increasingly diverse ways in which the King and divinity collide. To Reece, "Elvis was a transcendent figure because of his humanity". In other words, his many flaws humanise Elvis and allow us to identify with him as a figure perfectly poised between this world and a range of notions of what the next world might be.²⁷

Elvis certainly spans the borderlands, his image and power employed in a range of religious settings, some of which are blatantly ironic, others quite the opposite. Dorian Baxter earned consecration as a bishop within the Federation of Independent Anglican Churches in 2003, his ministry in Newmarket, Ontario, Canada, subsequently taking place in the independent church he established: the Christ the King Graceland Independent Anglican Church of Canada. Baxter's trademark Elvis pompadour and sideburns combined with his use of Elvis's music have long been employed in his ministry and while the church's website espouses a fairly traditional Anglican message, Baxter's own page within it still makes space to note that he "enjoys performing as an Elvis Tribute Artist. He has won the Collingwood Elvis Festival title and received many accolades."²⁸

Religious concepts of Elvis frequently focus on him as a figure trapped by his own fame and therefore – like Jesus – brought down by his responsibilities to his followers, in effect suffering for them. Confirmation bias and coincidence also combine to find life events – notably the 1968 television special now known to many as the "comeback" special – that link Elvis to Jesus. In the case of the comeback special, it is the notion of a resurrection at the age of 33.

Any sceptic can drill down into much Elvis-related forteana to find factual roots

that barely pass muster. Peter Eicher's *Elvis Sightings* (1993) gathers first-hand, usually semi-anonymised accounts of meetings with the King after 16 August 1977; but it offers no sources and ignores its own inner contradiction of combining sightings of the living Elvis, apparently having escaped from fame for a range of reasons, with Spirit Elvis sightings within which the King appears as an angelic being, possessing supernatural powers. Perhaps most prominently, the work of Gail Brewer-Giorgio has driven the conspiratorial beliefs regarding Elvis and fuelled groups like the 'Elvis the Man is Alive' crowd on Facebook. Brewer-Giorgio's novel *Orion* (1978) was a relative commercial failure, certainly in comparison to her subsequent work. The book maps the career of Orion Darnell, an alternative Elvis described in words that map the enigmatic appeal of the real one. His

early career, parallel with Elvis's period with Sam Philips, describes a talent in which, "he was suffering and he was the whip. The voice cried openly yet it lifted one's spirits to another plane."²⁹ Where the novel failed to ignite the world, the "factual" explorations starting with *Is*

Elvis Alive? (1988) found both ironic and literal appreciation sufficient to have an impact that included delaying the

issuing of Elvis postage stamps in the US until those responsible could be convinced Elvis really was really dead!

Concluding anything on the back of this brief trawl is a hostage to fortune, so I'll limit myself to a few simple final observations. Firstly, it would be simplistic to claim that Elvis's career ended in 1977; secondly, his posthumous career gives us insight into how a range of fortean beliefs develop, and so – if nothing else – Elvis is one of ours, regardless of what you think of his music. Finally, I think anyone revisiting this topic in 10 years will face a wealth of "evidence" unavailable today. The centenary of Elvis's birth is guaranteed to be a festival of forteana, so don't miss it!

For more fortean Elvis, see David Sutton, "King of Kings", **FT166:42-47**; Paul Ross, "In Rock 'n' Roll Heaven", **FT189:52-53**; Ted Harrison, "Michael, the King and Di", **258:40-43**; "Elvis: The Comeback special", **FT299:34-38**; Kate Cherrell, "The Return of the King", **FT411:57**. Also **FT26:9, 58:23, 60:47, 77:15, 88:34, 95:8, 21; 97:47, 102:20, 105:22, 123:12, 127:16, 144:12, 156:10, 195:8, 62, 241:18-19, 244:10, 257:9, 276:20, 297:54-55, 309:19**.

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❖ **NEIL NIXON** is a former academic now working as a live speaker and writer with a lifelong interest in all things fortean. His website is www.neilnixon.com/

THE LADY OF THE LAKE

A new documentary explores the manifold strands of weirdness in a 1940 murder case that taps into archetypal strangeness. **JOSHUA CUTCHIN** talks to director **RYAN GRULICH** about the fortaean inspirations for his film...

In July 1940, a dark secret broke the mirror-still surface of Washington State's Lake Crescent. At first, it seemed like nothing out of the ordinary. Yet its contrast against the water soon attracted a pair of fishermen. Motoring closer, they were shocked to find that it was actually a human hand thrusting up from the depths, reaching out as if beckoning to them.

So were the remains of Hallie Illingworth discovered three years after her tragic murder at the hands of her husband. Beyond the obvious interest aroused by any homicide, the case drew national attention for other macabre reasons. First was the eerie image that the discovery conjured up in the minds of newspaper readers; second, the fact that, through a process known as saponification, Illingworth's body had turned into a soap-like substance.

Finally – perhaps most importantly – the appearance of a body in Lake Crescent was a rarity. Because even though plenty of other victims had been consigned to its frigid depths, Lake Crescent had a reputation for “never giving up her dead”.

Given so many macabre factors, it was only a matter of time before Hallie Illingworth's murder spawned one of the Pacific Northwest's most enduring and disturbing legends. In the years since her remains were recovered, Hallie has become known as “The Lady of the Lake”. For more than 80 years, locals have sighted her restless spirit wandering the shores of Lake Crescent, sometimes weeping for the injustices she suffered.

As with most mysteries, the true story is not quite so tidy. A new documentary helps answer lingering questions regarding Illingworth's fate by placing them within the broader context of high strangeness around Lake Crescent and the surrounding region. In December 2024, *Lady of the Lake* debuted across all streaming platforms, with a physical media release scheduled for early in 2025.

I sat down with director Ryan Grulich to discuss the project, on which I served as producer, to help unsnarl the complex interplay of fact, folklore, and fortaena.



LAKE CRESCENT HAD A REPUTATION FOR “NEVER GIVING UP HER DEAD”



Joshua Cutchin: Ryan, thanks so much for taking the time to share this project with the readers of *Fortean Times*. I'm proud to be associated with *Lady of the Lake* because it tackles the subject matter with a more nuanced approach than we usually see

in this domain. But first, I want to know: how did your interest in the paranormal start?

Ryan Grulich: It's a natural byproduct of having paranormal experiences throughout my life. They've appeared at different times, sometimes at very important junctures of life or even just random moments, with varying degrees of intensity and sophistication.

I've always been interested in the topic, based on those experiences. On one occasion, living in a haunted house in Tacoma, Washington, I saw what I can only call a full-bodied apparition. It left such an impression on me that I made a short film about it, which was probably one of my earliest efforts at exploring the topic through film.

JC: You mentioned being in Tacoma – you have ties to the area around *Lady of the Lake*, right?

RG: Yeah. I lived in the Greater Seattle area for about 20 years, and the murder of Hallie Illingworth, which took place in what is now the Olympic National Forest at a place called Lake Crescent, is only about two-and-a-half hours outside of Seattle proper. So I had a history with the area, and since the story is such a big part of the area's history, I inevitably bumped into it as a student of strange stuff. I immediately found it fascinating, as a lot of locals do.

JC: It's one thing to find it fascinating, but something else entirely to dedicate years of your life to a project like this. What made you take on that commitment?

RG: I was with a friend who lived in the area who told me the story of the murder itself. And as I left the park near where Hallie's body was discovered, I was gazing off into



the woods through my car window, and I had a vision of sorts. I'm into experimental technology on the production side of things, and I was seeing in my mind's eye a scene: these trees at night, how light would bounce off them while a woman in a white dress walked slowly through the woods. It was such a striking image, I couldn't shake it. Later down the line, I stumbled into the countless stories about people seeing a woman in white in this area. There are so many accounts, I felt like they needed to be explored.

The pandemic complicated another project, so we decided to make a documentary, something hyper-local with a small crew. It's funny, because the image that popped into my head was before I learned about the paranormal aspect at all. As it turned out, sightings of Women in White were popularly attached to Hallie Illingworth's death.

JC: Something you said that is really important to understanding this project is the archetypal angle of the Woman in White. Time and again, it's said that Lake Crescent is bottomless and never gives up its dead. It reminds me of Michel Meurger's *Lake Monster Traditions* – those are some of the criteria he identifies for bodies of water harbouring lake monsters. It speaks to deeper connections running through all these disparate paranormal domains along what I'd call the archetypal level.

RG: It's important, when you talk about Lake Crescent, to recognise two things.

Number one: nobody has ever actually discovered the bottom of Lake Crescent, despite using LiDAR scanning to search for other remains in the lake, of which there have been plenty over the decades. All we know is that this lake is in excess of 650ft



LEFT: Lake Crescent is one of many such bodies of water that have a legend of being bottomless.

BELOW LEFT: The case reported in the *Long Beach Independent* of 31 October 1941. BELOW: The murdered Hallie as a ghostly Woman in White, warning of impending road accidents.

[198m] deep at its lowest discovered point. It's a mythology that still feels real today, enlivening some of the storytelling in the region.

Number Two: lots of bodies have gone in, more than 100, and very, very few have come out. A couple of other bodies have been recovered from the lake, but not many. Hallie was an exception. Lake Crescent really *doesn't* give up its dead.

Which means that there exist at least *kernels* of truth to the mythology. That said, the film looks at those situations as what I would call “generators for the battery” of this egregore that seems to have come to life after all these years. People swear they've seen Hallie Illingworth's form, whether she's sobbing by the lakeside, appearing as the Woman in White, or helping people avoid catastrophic automobile accidents, especially in winter conditions, around Lake Crescent's curvy, dangerous roads.

There's tons of different iterations, and they're all married to this mythos of the lake – probably because she is one of very few spirits that seem to have had their remains discovered, and is now seeking a way to communicate. I think that's really the “jet fuel” that created the archetypal Lady of the Lake in this specific area.

JC: How did this interplay between true crime, archetypes, and belief affect your approach to committing Hallie's story to film?

RG: The Lady of the Lake, The Woman in White – these are ancient archetypes. A lot of towns have a lake with a story like this, and there's a lot of Lady of the Lake-type cases around the world. Hallie's case is

Like the "Lady of the Lake" She Rose —

Not to Catch an Enchanted Blade But to Bring the Sword of Justice to the Man Who Had Murdered Her 4 Years Before

It is a tradition that the "Lady of the Lake" story has been told in many forms. In the most recent version, the story is told of a woman who was murdered and whose body was found in a lake. The story is told in many forms, but the most recent version is the most popular. The story is told in many forms, but the most recent version is the most popular. The story is told in many forms, but the most recent version is the most popular.



Hallie Illingworth, who was murdered in 1938, is shown in a portrait from the 1942 issue of *American Weekly*.



Paulson, who is shown in a portrait from the 1942 issue of *American Weekly*.

unique for several reasons. Locals have kept the story alive; it's more modern; there was a book, a movie – to say nothing of tons of documentation. It all illustrates how her case merged with this archetype.

Even more importantly, it all comes together to keep Hallie's memory alive. A terrible thing happened to her. It was an absolute tragedy. But by acknowledging how we interpret violence as a culture, how we cope with trauma as communities, we can hopefully create something that transcends her demise as a focal point – focusing on her as a person rather than what happened to her. Hallie gains a new life in all these stories, to which *Lady of the Lake* hopefully contributes.

JC: What *Lady of the Lake* excels at showing is the reciprocal relationship between our lives, our storytelling and the paranormal. After a certain point, these things become so mixed up, they feed off each other so intensely, that distinguishing those is not as easy – or even necessary – as we have been led to believe.

RG: That's exactly it. There's a symbiotic nature between storytelling and the paranormal.

And I think there's something really powerful in that. Communities have to reconcile the traumatic event, and so they send stories back out into the ether, where

WE CAN HOPEFULLY CREATE SOMETHING THAT TRANSCENDS HALLIE'S DEMISE

those stories reflect back as extraordinary experiences.

As a result, *Lady of the Lake* goes to some very strange places. When you and I were discussing this project, you referred to the idea that ghosts are the human dead as "The

Dead Person Hypothesis". It made me ask, "What if The Lady of the Lake isn't a ghost in the traditional sense? What else could it be?"

That leads us into the twists of the third act. Luckily, we had *Hellier's* Karl Pfeiffer and *Euphomet's* Jim Perry to help guide us and expand on that from a more academic perspective. And then, of course, there's Amanda Paulson [pictured below], who goes in hunting ghosts and comes out very unsure of what she's looking at.

JC: You mentioned Amanda, whom I would consider the beating heart of *Lady of the Lake*. How did you get in touch with her, and how do you think that this journey changed her?

RG: I first became familiar with Amanda's work on the Internet. She was doing great work as a paranormal investigator then and is doing great work as a paranormal investigator now. If nothing else, I hope *Lady of the Lake* gets more people to follow what she's doing, which is top-notch.

I was looking for a paranormal investigator with a very clinical style. That was important, because I had this hunch that we were going to bump into things that would really challenge the assumptions of whoever we partnered with. They had to be strong and open-minded enough to go with me into those stranger areas of speculation. I'm glad I chose Amanda, because we ended up looking at things like John Keel's theory of window areas and paranormal connections far beyond just the tragedy of Hallie Illingworth.



TOP: The story of Hallie's murder told in *American Weekly*, 17 May 1942. LEFT: Hallie's body on the day it was discovered; an interaction between minerals in the lake and fats in the corpse during three years in the freezing lake had turned the flesh to a soap-like substance in a process called saponification. ABOVE: Paranormal investigator Amanda Paulson by the lake with a photograph of Hallie.





ABOVE: Amanda Paulson “seemed to connect with Hallie on a deeper level than any other paranormal investigator working on a case.”

JC: That’s my favourite aspect of the film. You get to a point two-thirds in and say to yourself, “Wait – what the heck am I watching?”

RG: Exactly. Along with her background in ghost hunting, Amanda brought an open mind. That allowed for the more scientific approach – you know, with all the equipment and technology – to meet with the more emotional aspect of how stories of the supernatural touch our lives.

By the end of it, none of us (Amanda included, I think) were sure exactly whether or not we were dealing with ghosts or something stranger. Because it all feels so much *bigger* than a traditional haunting. It’s not surprising to me that we came to the same outcome, or at least that’s where I feel Amanda landed.

She really seemed to connect with Hallie on a level deeper than I’ve ever seen from any other paranormal investigator working on a case. Like the rest of us, she probably came out of the process with more questions than answers.

JC: For me, that lingering uncertainty is part of what distinguishes *Lady of the Lake* from a lot of other media in this space. You acknowledge how these things touch upon all other aspects – not only these phenomena as a whole, but the human condition itself. The only truly intellectually honest standpoint is to say: “These things happen.” We can

speculate why and what and where and how... but at the end of the day, you are just left with those “damned facts”. That makes it feel like more of a forteen documentary than a straightforward paranormal documentary.

RG: Absolutely. To paraphrase our mutual friend Greg Bishop, if you enter this endeavour with a “certainty fetish,” a need to have a third act that’s tied neatly in a bow... well, you tend to be let down or you’re living in an illusion. It’s all elusive. Its material, its composition, its name... it’s all elusive. You can’t always put your finger on it...

JC: With this project finished, what’s up next?

RG: You know what’s up next...

JC: You got me. Yeah, I’m being coy. One of the things I’ve found most rewarding about our relationship is that we both hold similar views of these

phenomena. Not necessarily agreeing on what they represent, but how they should be approached, how they should be interrogated. I’ve had an idea in the back of my head for a while that the current climate for things like UFOs is such that the public would be much more receptive than in years past to some more peculiar ideas about the UFO phenomenon.

RG: More peculiar than the ideas presented to them in the mainstream.

JC: Exactly. So, to that end, maybe this is a good place to let the cat out of the bag that we’ll be partnering on a documentary-driven project approaching the UFO mystery from a more inclusive, holistic perspective. There’s a lot of confounding aspects to UFOs that seem to get swept under the rug, and I think we’re in a better position than ever to address them. Hopefully, by tackling some of the alternative hypotheses that I feel deserve equal treatment in the discussion, we can make some headway.

Part of the reason why I think this partnership is a good idea is because of the breadth of what *Lady of the Lake* covers. I want to see that approach applied to the UFO phenomenon.

RG: It’ll be fun. Yeah, each individual aspect of the paranormal seems to encapsulate these broader questions, and UFOs are no exception. If we find ourselves wandering into the same unfamiliar territory that we did bringing Hallie Illingworth’s story to life, the journey will be worth it. Whenever you examine the unexplained, you’re not just looking at a mystery – you’re looking at a mirror. You’re looking back at yourself, at humanity itself. When Hallie reached out of Lake Crescent, she reached into our subconscious, into our folklore. To see how that comes to life, how it generates actual phenomena... that was more rewarding than I could have ever anticipated.

Ryan Grulich’s *Lady of the Lake* is available through video on demand on all streaming platforms, with a physical media release scheduled for January 2025. For more information, visit www.deathiswithme.com



THE TARVES BEASTIE

A FORGOTTEN GEF?

MICHAEL COX explores a neglected case that has many striking similarities with the contemporaneous but better known story of the 'Dalby Spook', now remembered as 'Gef the Talking Mongoose', and asks: Was this Gef's forgotten Scottish cousin?

The case of Gef the talking mongoose is typically considered

sui generis in the annals of *forteana*, with elements suggestive of a poltergeist infestation, *folie à deux*, or simply the presence of a self-described "extra clever" animal; and yet, taken in total, the facts resist any such neat categorisation.

In Christopher Josiffe's excellent and exhaustive *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose*, the author surveys a selection of happenings with similarities to the 'Dalby Spook', considering parallels with particular polts, tulpas and creatures from folklore. Yet left unmentioned is one little-known case that arguably has more in common with that Isle of Man mystery than any other, and even occurred contemporaneously with it: I refer to the largely forgotten case of the 'Tarves Beastie'.

ACCOUNT OF THE CASE

News of the 'ghost' first appeared on 26 March 1934, with simultaneous articles in the local *Aberdeen Press & Journal* and the *Dundee Courier*; ¹ but by that point, the matter had already been "the subject of much talk in the Tarves district of Aberdeenshire for some time".

Mr Alexander Wilkie, Mrs Mary Wilkie and their grand-daughter, nine-year-old Isabella 'Bunty' Ross, had moved into Gate-side Croft the previous November; about a month later they heard "a mysterious voice coming from behind a wall of the house". They were initially alarmed, but apparently soon got used to it and had been "on speak-



LEFT: Photo of Mr & Mrs Wilkie & Bunty Ross from the *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 26 March 1934.

wall said, 'No, but I have a beak.'"

When Mr Wilkie tried to tempt the creature out with some food, the voice claimed that it could not reach it because he'd "plugged up the hole". Sure enough, Mr Wilkie had recently filled a small hole in the wall to stop a draught coming through.

One of the more entertaining aspects of the voice was its willingness to tell strangers what it thought of them "in

THE SQUEAKY, HIGH-PITCHED VOICE SPOKE "IN A BROAD BUCHAN DIALECT"

ing terms" with the voice for three months since.

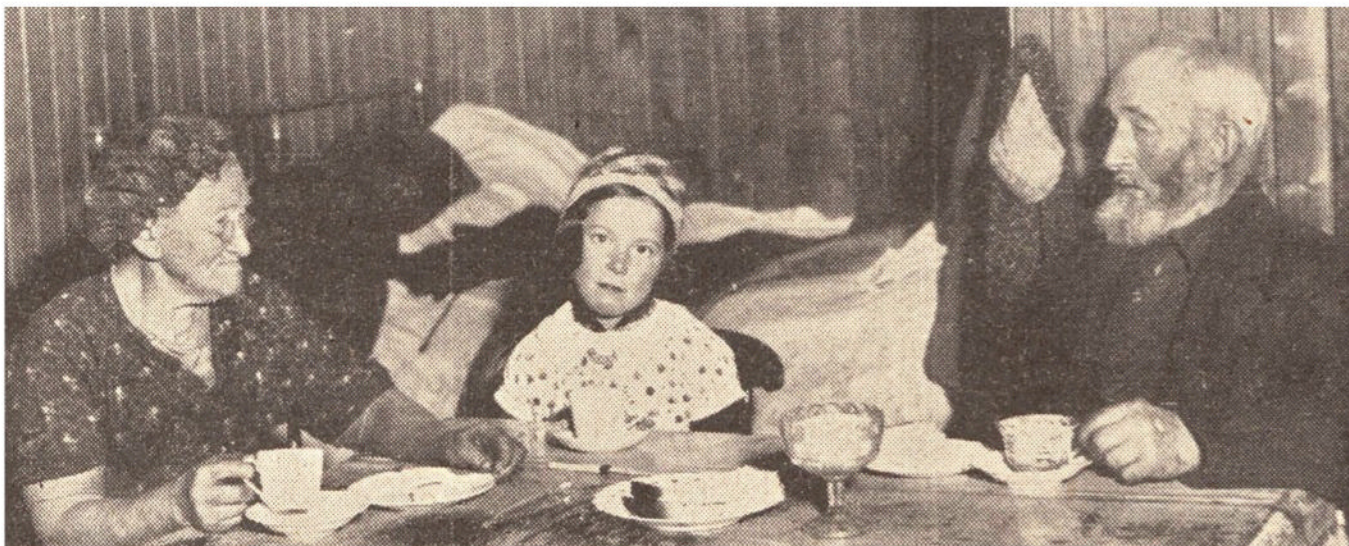
The squeaky, high-pitched voice, which spoke "in a broad Buchan dialect" (common to the area), was reported to be able to tell the time of day, repeat the alphabet, count up to 20, say The Lord's Prayer and even sing songs. It would answer questions put to it, but was evasive when it came to its own nature, as shown when Mrs Wilkie asked it: "What are you? Have you four legs, and got a quiet, 'Aye'.

"Have you a tail," Mrs Wilkie pursued the cross-examination, and the voice from the

a very straightforward manner", it being "no respecter of persons". This drew neighbours back for repeat visits, and the Wilkies seemed happy to host demonstrations of the "beastie", as it was now being called.

The situation changed, coincident with the commencement of serious enquiries. When the press first contacted Mr Wilkie on 25 March, he told them that the voice had "died" five days earlier, meaning no visiting journalists were able to witness the activity themselves. The first articles stressed the likelihood of the voice being a hoax, the *Dundee Courier* piece carrying the subheading "Neighbours Suspect a Trick", and the *Press & Journal* item closing with: "In the district the general opinion is that a trick is being played on the old folks, and there is a strong suspicion as to the identity of the person responsible for the voice."

Two days later, the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* carried the headline "Mystery of 'Haunted' Scottish Croft Solved" and declared the ghost to be none other than



ABOVE: Mr & Mrs Wilkie & Bunty Ross inside Gateside Croft. BELOW: The "strange happenings" reported in the *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, 26 March 1934.

Bunty Ross. Apparently the girl "possessed the power of ventriloquism" and had been producing the voice in the wall as a prank. The article stated that Bunty's secret was exposed when "at school she lapsed unconsciously into using the unnatural voice and the teacher became suspicious".

The next day, the story of the hoax saw wide coverage, with articles published as far afield as Belfast and in high-profile publications such as the *Daily Mirror*. Curiously, there were conflicting accounts given of the circumstances of Bunty Ross's apparent confession: the *Evening Telegraph* piece implied she had confessed to her teacher; the *Shields Daily News* stated that Bunty "admitted to the police" that she was behind the voice; and the *Press & Journal* said only that "she has admitted to responsible persons who have made inquiries that she exercised her gift of ventriloquism to produce the voice from the wall". No direct confession was made to the press, nor apparently to her grandparents, who remained adamant that Bunty was not behind the "beastie".

SIMILARITIES WITH GEF

The environmental similarities between Gateside Croft and Doarlish Cashen (home of Gef and the Irving family) are worth noting. Both were rural agricultural locations, with a family unit of three occupying the home. Doarlish was slightly more isolated, lying roughly two miles from Dalby; Gateside Croft was the same distance from Tarves, but had neighbours within half a mile. The family age-gap was more extreme at Gateside: when Gef first made his presence known in 1931, Mr and Mrs Irving were in their mid-to-late 50s, their daughter Voirrey 13; when the Beastie first spoke, the Wilkies were in their 80s, and their granddaughter Bunty only nine.

The cottage at Gateside was described by a neighbour as "a dark, dreary house",² in that respect similar to the old farmhouse at Doarlish with its stained panelled walls and

"GHOST" SPEAKS FROM WALL

STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT SCOTS CROFT

Neighbours Suspect a Trick

Inquiries into an extraordinary "ghost" story that gripped Tarves (Aberdeenshire) and district were made by a "Courier and Advertiser" representative yesterday.

The scene is the small croft of Gateside, Tarves, which is occupied by an old couple, Mr and Mrs A. Wilkie, and their grandchild, Bunty Ross, a bright child of about nine years.

Mr and Mrs Wilkie went to reside at the croft in November. About a month later they heard a mysterious voice coming from behind the wall.

At first the visitation was inclined to alarm them, but in time they became used to it, and for about three months they claim to have been on conversational terms with this voice.

It answered questions and told the time of day.

Four Legs

For instance, Mrs Wilkie asked it: "What are you? Have you four legs?" and got a quiet "Aye." "Have you a tail?" "No, but I have a beak."

The voice expressed preference for chicken, but refused to come out and get a bit, as it said Mr Wilkie had plugged up the hole. It so happened that Mr Wilkie had filled in a small hole in the wall through which a draught had been coming.

The voice had a wide range of accomplishments. In a broad Buchan dialect it could repeat the alphabet, count up to 90, say the Lord's Prayer, sing "A Bicycle Built for Two" and the hymn "Jesus Loves Me."

Talked to Strangers

It often talked to strangers, and in a straightforward manner told them that they were inquisitive when they asked too closely about its identity.

Yesterday Mr Wilkie, who is 83 years of age, told the "Courier and Advertiser" representative that the voice died on Tuesday night, and the family were at a loss to explain the reason.

On inquiry in the district, it was found that the general opinion is that a trick is being played on the old folks.

sparse paraffin lamp lighting. Looking to their immediate surroundings, both properties had prehistoric remains practically on their doorsteps: less than half a mile to the north east of Gateside Croft was the Hill of Courtstone, once topped with a tall cairn from which two urns containing cremated remains were recovered.³ Around five hundred yards northwest of Doarlish Cashen can be found the remains of a Bronze Age cairn circle and grave.⁴

There are also parallels to be drawn between the two (popularly presumed) focal points of the phenomena, Voirrey Irving and Bunty Ross. Both were young women with elderly parental figures, living in sparsely populated rural areas, attending small local schools, and known to socialise more with animals than other children. When not at home with her parents, Voirrey was typically to be found roaming the hills with her sheepdog Mona; Bunty confided to a visiting journalist that "she had a cat, a black one, and its name was Topsy, but this was her only playmate. There was no schoolfellow who came to share her romps. She spent all her spare time with the old couple."

The similarities between Gef and the Beastie are particularly interesting. Both presences gave bizarre descriptions of themselves that matched no known animal: Gef, though apparently a mongoose, claimed to be a "freak" with "hands and feet"; as stated above, the Beastie claimed to possess both four legs and a beak. Though Gef was known to venture outside, when indoors his voice would usually emanate from the walls, much like the Beastie. Both of them spoke in a shrill high-pitched voice, with a local accent and using local idiom.⁵ They also shared a fondness for singing, including in their repertoire both hymns (Gef liked "Jesus my Saviour on Calvary's Tree" and "The King of Love my Shepherd Is"⁶; the Beastie favoured "Jesus Loves Me"), and popular songs (Gef, "Isle of Capri", among others⁷; the Beastie, "A Bicycle Built For Two").

MYSTERY "VOICE" AT TARVES.

Girl's Natural Gift of Ventriloquism.

A BUNTY WHO PULLED PEOPLE'S LEGS.

A remarkable solution is forthcoming of the Tarves "ghost" mystery, which has puzzled the district for the past few weeks. The mysterious voice which was heard was the voice of a nine-year-old girl who is a natural ventriloquist.

The girl is Bunty Ross, grandchild of Mr and Mrs Alexander Wilkie, Gateside Croft, Tarves.

Some time ago the old couple were astounded when a "voice" commenced speaking to them from the wall of the house. It would carry on a conversation with them, and when visitors and neighbours called at the house they were amazed to hear "it" recite the Lord's Prayer and sing well-known modern songs, as well as repeat the alphabet and count up to twenty.

The whole circumstances were suspiciously "ghostly" and the more credulous believed that some invisible spirit was conversing with them.

No Idea of Furore.

Throughout the sensation in the parish Bunty kept her secret well. She used her unnatural voice purely for personal amusement, and in her childish mind she had no idea of the furore her pranks were creating.

How she discovered she possessed a ventriloquial voice is not known.

After a great deal of private practice, in which animals were persuaded to "answer" her questions, she essayed her art one evening in the house and was delighted with the effect the voice produced.

She continued the prank for a long time, and gradually her second voice became famous.

When a "Press and Journal" representative called at Gateside last night, Bunty proved very shy and would not accede to a request for a demonstration of her ventriloquism.

Giving Nothing Away.

She simply smiled, but would not speak a word.

She would not even reveal how she came to use her unnatural voice, but it is almost certain that she never saw a professional ventriloquist on the stage.

Her grandparents are still sceptical of her ventriloquism, despite the fact that she has admitted to responsible persons who have made inquiries that she exercised her gift of ventriloquism to produce the voice from the wall.

When she first attended Barthol-Chapel School some months ago she was a fluent speaker and reader.

Last week, however, she developed a serious stammer, some of her words being entirely incoherent. In consequence of inquiries then made, it was found that she possessed a ventriloquial voice.

Going home from school one afternoon she played a joke on a schoolmate by making a "voice" speak from a ditch. Her chum was a little afraid until she was told that "it was only a trick."

"Voice" Now Silent.

The "voice" has not been heard at Gateside since Thursday of last week—significant as being coincident with the first "official" inquiries—and this is an added mystery to the old couple.

The explanation of the whole occurrence is remarkable, and although the majority of people believed that the "ghost" and the "voice" were capable of explanation, practically no one suspected that the nine-year-old girl held the secret.

A ventriloquial voice, possessed by few people, requires little development to produce sounds as if emanating from sources other

Gef would frequently mock – or even threaten – those around him, in one extreme case telling a guest "before I saw you I was going to blow your brains out with a 3d cartridge, but [I] like you now".⁸ The Beastie took a similar tone in his interactions with others, to the delight of the Wilkies' neighbours. The *Larne Times* recorded: "I'll need to be going down the road now," said one woman visitor who had been listening to the mysterious noises.

"From the wall of the house came a low-pitched voice, 'And I'll come hame wi' ye.'

"Deed, ye will no' do that," exclaimed the startled woman, as she collected her hat and coat and fled from the house."⁹

Gef's predilection for cakes and sweets was a sticking point for those attempting to label the creature as a purely spiritual presence. Likewise, food appeared to be on the mind of the Beastie, as it "expressed a preference for chicken". Mr Wilkie was certainly convinced that it was a physical animal, specifically a jackdaw that had become trapped in the wall somehow; it's unclear exactly what led him to this conclusion, though jackdaws are known to be intelligent birds capable of imitating human speech. Following the voice's "death", he claimed that it had "dee't for wint o' me't" (died for want of meat).

PRESS TREATMENT

The Tarves and Doarlish cases were handled similarly by the press: in both cases, no sooner was the mystery presented than ventriloquism was touted as the explanation. Bunty was claimed to have "discovered by accident that she possessed the power of ventriloquism", with the ability being described as follows: "A ventriloquial voice, possessed by few people, requires little development to produce sounds as if emanating from sources other than the vocal organs."¹⁰

The *Press & Journal* reported that Bunty had performed "a great deal of private practice, in which animals were 'persuaded' to answer her questions" before commencing the "prank"; and also that one afternoon she had played a joke on a schoolmate by making a voice speak from a ditch.¹¹

These claims mirror statements made about Voirrey Irving's behaviour: that she "talks to the animals a good deal" and "attributes personalities to them"¹² and was known to scare schoolchildren by throwing her voice "up high into a tree, or down beneath a bridge".¹³

It must be made clear that there is no such thing as a "ventriloquial voice" in the sense of it being an innate special ability as implied in these press reports. It is not possible to naturally make one's voice emanate from a different location; rather, the effect of ventriloquism rests on physical misdirection to suggest that such a thing is happening, and requires much practise to perform effectively.

When local reporter Eleanor Castel paid a visit to the Wilkies shortly after the hoax story broke, she found the elderly couple insistent that Bunty had nothing to do with

the voice. They denounced the claims made about their grand-daughter in the press, and pointed out that the Beastie had been heard even while Bunty was not present. Miss Lizzie Stott, housekeeper to a nearby farmer, was also questioned and confirmed that she too had heard the voice while Bunty had been at school: "Nothing would shake her from her conviction that a supernatural agency had been at work."

Other neighbours interviewed were less convinced. A Mrs Sinclair described visiting the croft to hear the Beastie, along with her friend Mrs Bonnar, where they observed: "Bunty hid an atlas stuck up in front o' her face, an' ilka time the beastie spak, doon bobbit Bunty's heid. Onybody wid hae kent it wis her. She was lauchin' a' the time."

Apparently they enjoyed the spectacle enough to return on several occasions, and on each visit "Bunty had something stuck up in front of her face, a book, a newspaper, or knitting" while the voice spoke.

Mrs Sinclair was interviewed again almost 30 years later by the *Evening Express*, where she related the same story, and also recalled the following exchange with Mrs Wilkie:

"Mrs Wilkie came to us next night and asked 'Fit dae ye think o' the ghost?'"

"I said that you could see it was the quine on the bed that was the ghost. Mrs Wilkie got into an affa rage. After that nae-body got into the Wilkies' cottage."¹⁴

Even though Ms Castel spent time alone with Bunty during her visit, the young girl made no confession to her, nor gave any demonstration of her supposed ventriloquial abilities. She did, however, comment that "the beastie niver spoke tae me", this apparently said with "a distinctly mischievous gleam in her eye".

A HOAX?

Why are there such polarised opinions as to the source of the voice, with one side convinced that it originated from an anomalous presence, and the other equally confident that it was transparent tomfoolery?

One possibility is that *both* parties were correct. It is not uncommon in poltergeist cases for the focal individual to be caught in trickery, even if apparently genuine phenomena have been observed at other times. Parapsychologist Hans Bender investigated two cases, in Bremen and Nicklheim, where the subjects were caught cheating when the more exotic activity was on the wane.¹⁵ William G Roll also described investigations where obvious chicanery was intermingled with otherwise baffling happenings.¹⁶

Janet and Margaret Hodgson, at the centre of the Enfield case, admitted faking "two per cent" of activity, stating that such misbehaviour was "always caught by [investigators] Mr Grosse or Mr Playfair."¹⁷

The Doarlish Cashen case seems to fall into the same category: despite numerous witness going on record as having heard Gef speak when Voirrey was absent, Mr J Radcliffe of the *Isle of Man Examiner* recorded

having the following experience after leaving the house one Sunday in 1932:

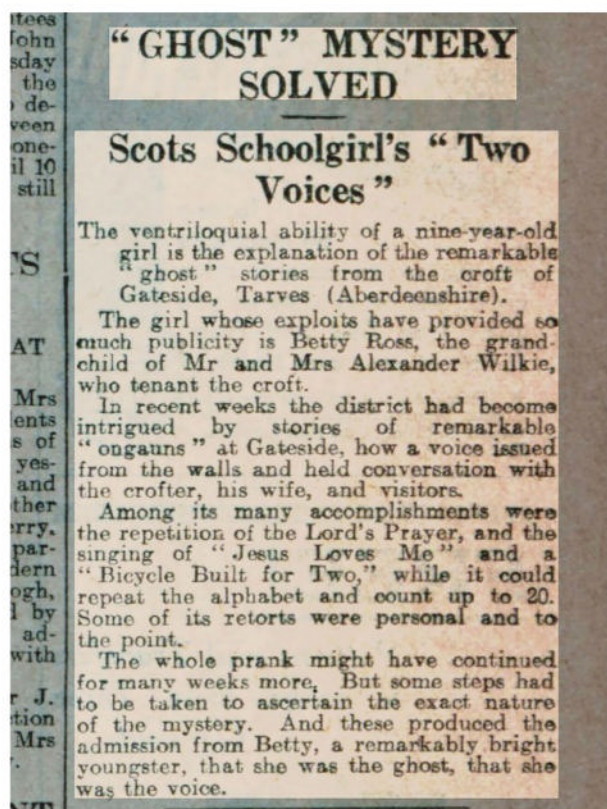
"Mr Irving decided to accompany us part of the way down that beautiful footpath and invited Voirrey to join us. On the way down I noted that she had a tendency to hang behind, and once again we heard a piping squeak with Mr Irving again wildly gesticulating and pointing to the hedge (about two feet in height) and whispering 'He's there I tell you. He's there.' THIS was really too much, for my hearing is very good, and the squeak without doubt was human and came from immediately behind me." ¹⁸

If we are to consider these as instances of crude fakery happening alongside legitimate supernatural activity, then we must ponder the motives of the faker. The source in these cases is typically unwilling to perform on command (consider the many visitors Gef refused to appear for); it is easy to imagine the person at the centre of the activity, particularly if a child, responding to this unusual level of attention by synthesising the expected outcome, either out of embarrassment, or for their own amusement, or simply in a bid to sustain said attention.

Although it is possible for fraudulent and legitimate activity to co-exist, the former is no guarantee of the latter; but if the Beastie amounted to no more than the shambolic ventriloquist act described by Mrs Sinclair, how could the Wilkies possibly have been taken in by it at all, let alone for a stretch of months?

The behaviour of Mr and Mrs Wilkie in the wake of the "confession" is significant: if Bunty had made admission to them, it is logical to expect that they would have quietly let the matter rest. The fact that they instead continued to argue for the reality of the Beastie raises questions as to the validity of Bunty's confession (which we have conflicting accounts of, and no direct source for); or, at the very least, indicates that the Wilkies were not convinced by it. Certainly, ventriloquism alone would not explain the voice being heard by multiple witnesses while Bunty was at school.

Whether the Tarves Beastie had any true supernatural element or not, the similarities to the Doarlish Cashen case – in terms of physical setting, social dynamic, and the



THE BEASTIE WAS DECLARED DEAD THE MOMENT THE SPOTLIGHT HIT IT

OPPOSITE PAGE: The ventriloquism solution for the Tarves "mystery voice" is put forward in the *Press & Journal*, 29 March 1934...

BELOW: ... and in the *Dundee Courier* of the same date. LEFT: Bunty pictured in the *Press & Journal* of 2 April 1934, which asked the question: "Is THIS the Tarves 'Ghost'?"

nature and behaviour of the voice – are remarkable. Given the two cases were contemporaneous, it's natural to ask whether reports of the "talking man-weasel" might have influenced the development of the Beastie. Gef (before he was named such) first hit the headlines in January 1932, with stories in the *Manchester Daily Dispatch*; however, coverage seems to have receded to mainly Isle of Man newspapers for a few years after that, with national press coverage returning in 1935 for a Harry Price radio broadcast about the case, and again in 1936 with the publication of *The Haunting of Cashen's Gap*. The Beastie's first appearance in November 1933 coincides with no known press about Gef. Although it is impossible to rule out the chance that Bunty could have heard about the case from somewhere, there is no immediately obvious way a nine-year-old girl in North East Scotland would have been exposed to the story of Gef at that particular time.

But one matter of timing that certainly seems significant is the commencement of activity coinciding with the Wilkies' relocation to a new area, a situation that found Bunty starting at a new school, friendless and socially isolated. Whether this was a case of a lonely girl playing a game for amusement or attention, or the mysterious external manifestation of an emotional disturbance, the context would fit either scenario.

DIFFERENCES TO GEF

The most significant difference in the two cases relates not to the phenomenon itself, but the behaviour of the respective families. Despite dissatisfaction with the press handling and the subsequent negative attention, James Irving remained fascinated with Gef and eager to discuss the case with interested parties for the rest of his life; the Wilkies, on the other hand, clamped down in the wake of the mockery that the first press exposure brought them. Whereas Gef continued to attract investigators for years, and thus generated a wealth of written accounts and (mixed) evidence, the Tarves Beastie was declared dead as soon as the spotlight hit it.

With neighbours banned from visiting, and reporters no longer trusted, written records of the Beastie reach an abrupt end. We have no way of knowing whether



BELOW: In 1993, Gateside Croft was being offered for sale, and by 1995 the original building had been demolished and a new house built on the site.
ABOVE: The area surrounding the site of Gateside Croft photographed in November 2024.

the presence truly had ceased activity as claimed, or if this was just a ruse to divert attention away from it; certainly, Gef was known to have dormant periods of several weeks at a time, so reports of the Beastie's death may have been premature. It is tempting to wonder whether, had the Beastie received the sustained attention that Gef did, we might have ended up with a comparable accrual of odd details and questionable evidence: some ambiguous photographs and beak impressions, perhaps?

AFTERMATH

Gateside Croft was put up for sale by Mr Wilkie in 1936,¹⁹ but records show he was still living there as late as 1939.²⁰ At some point, a relative of the Wilkies cut away part of the mysterious wall in the cottage, but nothing was discovered: no remains of an imprisoned jackdaw, nor anything else of note.²¹

Press enquiries in 1961 found that Mr and Mrs Wilkie had long since passed away (Mr Wilkie was 84 at the time the story first broke), and no one in the area had any idea what became of Bunty Ross.²² In 1993, Gateside Croft again appeared for sale, this time with planning permission attached for a new dwelling house,²³ and by 1995 the original croft had been demolished and built over.²⁴

Thus a final point of connection in the two cases: with all involved parties passed on, and the structures cleared from the land, the full stories behind these strange happenings will forever elude us; but the curiously specific commonalities in the cases might be meaningful, and any insight we gain into one may shine additional light on the other.

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For more on Gef, see **FT269:32-40, 353:34-39, 315:18-19, 436:32-35, 56-59.**

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TRUMP'S DEMON HUNTERS

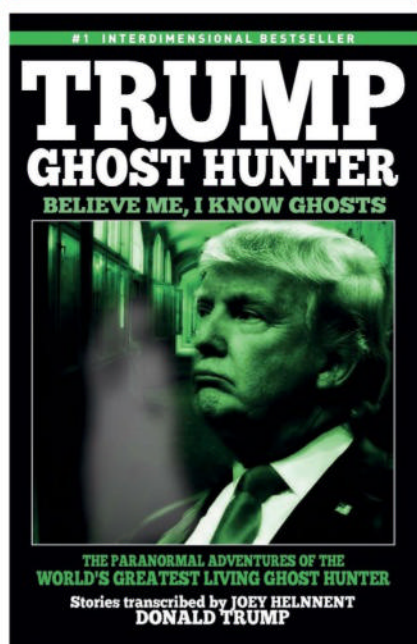
As Donald Trump triumphantly re-occupies the White House for a second time, his choice of Cabinet has caused much controversy – but, says **SD TUCKER**, do not despair. At least Musk, RFK Jr, et al, will help keep mankind safe from the assembled opposition Demoncrat forces of Hell.

The first time Donald Trump was elected to be US President back in 2016, the news was so bigly received by the world's media that it proved easy as American Pie for aspiring authors to get books published on the Big Orange Man, adopting any and all obscure and niche angles possible; one man even somehow managed to get into print with a children's story imagining what would happen if Donald inexplicably began to gradually morph into a duck – like Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, but less beetle-based. *Donald Trump Slowly Becoming a Harmless Duck*, seemingly written by the spirit of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy (or a satirical artist posing as such, anyway) was published in 2020, the year of Trump's first dethronement as President, as an apparent antidote to the 'Esoteric KEKist' movement of online ctrl-alt-right-delete meme-magicians who had supposedly helped Donald get elected first time around (see **FT365:54-55, 369:40-45**). According to the blurb, "This book teaches you about the all-powerful forgotten god, Quakomorotor, as we attempt to contact the astral plane. Together we will transmute the 45th President of the United States of America into a duck." As Trump lost in 2020, becoming an actual lame-duck leader during his final few months in office, I suppose this anti-orange, white magic spell must have actually worked – at least until November 2024 came around.

An even more interesting tome from a forteen perspective was the supposedly autobiographical *TRUMP GHOST HUNTER: Believe Me, I Know Ghosts – The Paranormal Adventures of the World's Greatest Living Ghost Hunter*. Appropriately enough, the book was ghostwritten for Mr Trump by Joey 'Ghost Killer' Helnnent, who purports to be a ghostbuster himself, his chosen method of busting their asses being to kick the shit out of them with karate moves. It may be only 28 pages long, and thus more of a pamphlet or monograph than a full blown book per se, but it certainly seems to cram in a lot of action, its blurb promising "mind-blowing tales of Black-Eyed Kids, Haunted Locations, and even Trump's battle with Satan. Hold onto your brains because they are about to explode." Inside, the incredible truth is revealed: that when he gave his infamous old pre-election speech claiming Mexican migrants into the US were all



**"THEY'RE...
SENDING GHOSTS
THAT HAVE LOTS
OF PROBLEMS"**



ABOVE: The Donald's famed dance moves should see off any demons, while according to a very short 2016 book he is also the world's greatest ghost hunter.

potential rapists, Trump was really speaking metaphorically about the less desirable denizens of the afterlife then pouring into America without valid visas. His peroration should actually have run thus: "When the after-death world sends its ghosts, they're not sending the best. They're... sending ghosts that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems with them. They're knocking things over. They're knocking on walls. They're ghosts... And some, I assume, are demons."¹

Online Amazon reviews of the book are mixed, with some correctly perceiving it to be a parody, calling it "hilarious" and "a thoroughly enjoyable 30 minute read". Others, however, appear disappointed, having apparently presumed it was going to tell a true story. "I don't believe anything written in this book... it is too outlandish! DON'T WASTE YOUR MONEY!" complained one D Stull. Was D Stull just being V Dull here? Not necessarily, because, at least to judge by some of the assistants and Cabinet members Trump has now gathered around for his second term in office, POTUS47 may well be about to embark upon a new and unexpected career of unclean entity-battling after all. It's time to meet Team Trump: Demon Hunters!

ERIN SCOTT / THE WHITE HOUSE



GAGE SKIDMORE

ABOVE LEFT: Hallowe'en at the White House, with Jill Biden dressed as a panda. According to Nicole Shanahan (below) this amounted to brazen mocking of the victims of Satanic Demoncrat child abuse. ABOVE RIGHT: RFK Jr, with his brain-eating parasite and dead bear antics, is one of the higher-profile mavericks on Team Trump.

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

Personally, I was very pleased when Trump won back in November, not least because I think he's funny. Others are less enthusiastic, thinking him more demon than demon-slayer. Some such critics say his Cabinet is even worse, being little more than an assemblage of all the powers and principalities of Hell itself, from Mephistopheles to Pazuzu.

Certainly, some aides are eccentric. Trump's new efficiency tsar Elon Musk appears to believe we are currently all living inside a giant computer simulation, and that his ex-girlfriend, the musician Grimes, was created for him as a perfect AI girlfriend (so perfect, they split up) by his own coding-wizard self from the future. Robert F Kennedy Jr, meanwhile, Trump's chosen Health Secretary, claims to have had his head invaded by a brain-worm which literally ate away some of his own valuable grey matter (FT451:5), potentially explaining some of his stranger activities, like driving around New York dumping dead bears in parks for no apparent reason. It seems RFK Jr's cerebellum was so poisonous that the worm in question "ate a portion of it and then died."² But Musk and Kennedy are just the famous mavericks. Far odder and less well known are the attitudes and beliefs of some of Trump's more minor associates.

RFK may or may not be mad, due to having hungry parasites inhabiting his skull. But what is the excuse for the loony utterances of his one-time running-mate Nicole Shanahan? Before throwing in the towel and joining Trump's ticket, RFK Jr was standing for President himself, and his potential Vice-President was Shanahan, an ultra-rich Silicon Valley-type and former wife of Google co-founder Sergey Brin, who has more recently relaunched herself



as a wellness guru. Shanahan has since switched her allegiance to Trump, giving speeches in her new overlord's name. Trump has occasionally called the Democrats' agenda "demonic", but he seems to be speaking purely figuratively. Shanahan has followed suit, but her level of seriousness is more ambiguous. She has bemoaned the "deeply troubling, almost demonic forces that have overtaken our [government] agencies and our culture" under President Joe Biden's Demoncrat rule from 2020-24. The word "almost" makes this sound like purely allegorical language, yet she has also openly questioned whether or not Biden's "Government might be Satanically possessed", which sounds more serious.

Furthermore, last October when Sleepy Joe's wife Jill dressed up as a panda for Hallowe'en, Shanahan gave a speech condemning "The parading of Jill Biden in a panda suit yesterday – right in front of our eyes!" What was wrong with dressing up

as a panda? Pandas are cute, aren't they? Not to adherents of the Qanon cult, who believe a cabal of Devil-worshippers really does control the Demoncrat Party and the Deep State alike, abusing children to please His Satanic Majesty. Among Qanon-ers, the term "panda eyes" refers to the puffy eyes kidnapped kids gain from crying so much after being raped by Creepy Uncle Joe & Co, and Shanahan was seemingly nodding to such beliefs in her lecture, suggesting Jill was cruelly mocking their suffering in public through her cosplaying. Jill herself would argue it was only a timely reference to some new pandas being delivered to the National Zoo in Washington just before Hallowe'en, but Shanahan knew better.³

Whether Shanahan genuinely believed this conspiracy or not is unknown; she may just have been panda-ing to Qanon voters on Trump's unspoken behalf. Seemingly more sincere in his belief about the influence of demonic forces upon US politics is Trump's chief media cheerleader Tucker Carlson, the ex-Fox News presenter turned online star and staunch champion of Christian values, at one of whose pro-Trump rallies Shanahan herself delivered her ominous assessment of Jill's panda outfit. Just ahead of the 5 November vote, Carlson appeared in an online preview clip of a forthcoming documentary, *Christianities?*, in which he was interviewed about a nocturnal paranormal encounter in his bed one night, which left him "mauled, physically mauled" by "something unseen that left claw marks in my sides." He may actually have been suffering from some form of sleep paralysis, having awoken "totally confused... I couldn't breathe, and I thought I was going to suffocate", a classic symptom of the malady. That said, he also then noticed, "I had four

BIA-ECHO FOUNDATION



claw marks on either side underneath my arms and my left shoulder," which were "bleeding." Telling an assistant who happened to be an Evangelical, Carlson was informed: "That happens, people are attacked in their beds by demons." Carlson informed the documentary that this had been a "transformative experience" that had left him "seized with this very intense desire to read the Bible."

I strongly suspect he may also have been seized with an intense desire to read sometime FT contributor Nick Redfern's 2010 UFO book *Final Events: And the Secret Government Group on Demonic UFOs and the Afterlife*, which claims a secret group within the US Deep State, the Collins Elite, had been investigating flying saucers since the immediate post-war era, before concluding that ufonauts were really demons in disguise. These demons had abused their position to give foolish mankind, in the shape of the US military-industrial complex, access to their advanced, allegedly 'ET' (but really demonic) technology, like nuclear weapons, thereby giving us the ability to one day destroy ourselves – a modern-day recasting of the Faust myth.

Days before the 5 November vote, Carlson went onto the War Room podcast of Trump's old ally Steve Bannon to promote the potential next President's cause, while also taking the opportunity to slip the following surprising revelations into the conversation: "Nuclear weapons are demonic, there's no upside to them at all, and anyone who claims otherwise is either ignorant or doing the bidding of the forces that created nuclear technology in the first place, which were not human forces obviously. Let me ask you this. What was the moment we can point to that nuclear technology was invented? I've never met a person who can isolate the moment where nuclear technology became known to man. German scientists in the 1930s? Really? Name the date? It's very clear to me that these [nuclear weapons] are demonic." I would have thought that to "name the date" would have been fairly easy; mid-1945, when the various known human scientists like J Robert Oppenheimer and Leo Szilard at Los Alamos quite demonstrably perfected the first A-bomb prior to dropping it on Japan. If the world ever slips into nuclear crisis in relation to conflicts with Russia, China or North Korea during the next four years, I certainly hope Trump doesn't turn to Carlson for advice on the matter.⁴

PASTOR POINT OF ALL BELIEF

Maybe instead the Donald could turn for guidance to his long-term personal pastor Paula White, a millionaire neo-charismatic Evangelical televangelist whom Trump



LEFT: Trump's favourite pastor, Paula White, has previously expressed concern about "Demon Lords" and "hidden sorcerers". BELOW: Tucker Carlson reported a nocturnal run-in with a demon that left him with "claw marks" on his body.

"PEOPLE ARE ATTACKED IN THEIR BEDS BY DEMONS"



has used as a trusted confidante ever since 2002, when he saw one of her sermons on TV. During her chief worshipper's time in power, White headed up the White House's Faith and Opportunity Initiative, a role she may end up filling once again. White definitely believes in demons, to the extent she has in the past claimed "Demon Lords" and "hidden sorcerers" were ranged against Trump as his true opponents – forget shadowy CIA agents and unelected Davos Men, the genuine Deep State White thinks Trump is fighting is very deep indeed, for it is nothing less than Hell itself. In 2020, White was criticised for praying as follows: "In the name of Jesus, we

command all Satanic pregnancies to miscarry right now. We declare that anything that's been conceived in Satanic wombs... [will] miscarry, it will not be able to carry forth any plan of destruction, any plan of harm." Some literal-minded critics foolishly thought (or pretended to think for the purposes of smearing her) that White was praying for the foetuses of left-wing mothers to die here or something; in fact, she was talking allegorically, the "Satanic pregnancies" being the left-wing policies of the Democrats which had ultimately been authored by their true leader – not Joe Biden but Lucifer Morningstar.

Charismatic Evangelicals in America practise 'Spiritual Warfare', which takes its cue from the King James Bible verse of Ephesians 6:12, which reads: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." These "powers" and "principalities" are the chief underlings of Satan, who govern invisibly over all the separate dominions of Earth, much as each separate human nation has its own President or Prime Minister. It is the job of charismatic Spiritual Warfare troops to gather supernatural intel about hellish politics within their own locality, working out who Hades' local MPs and councillors in the area are, before combating these minor demons by taunting them out into the open with insults and engaging in prayer combat to expel their presence. According to one summary of their bizarre political exorcism expeditions, known as 'Spiritual Mapping', "They practise what they call 'strategic-level spiritual warfare', where they name and describe various powerful demons who rule over various geographic territories. They try to discern the witches and other followers who act as lieutenants and recruiters, and they search out and destroy objects of occult significance that spread demonic influence."

Pastor White thinks one of Hell's chief politicians governing life in Democrat America over recent decades has been Jezebel, the notorious pagan princess from the Bible who has since become a full-blown demon-whore following death. It is she who presides over the current carnival of sexual excess and hyper-feminism sweeping the nation, as with the furious anti-Trump 'Pussy Hat' marchers or the leftist ladies who recently declared they were going on a

(highly un-Jezebel-like) sex-strike following Trump's 2024 victory. She also especially hates the rival biblical Demon Prince Leviathan; appropriate for a member of a new administration which, under the waste-cutting influence of Elon Musk, professes an insatiable desire for small government.

In White's own personal conception of the entity, Leviathan is a many-headed dragon responsible for giving ordinary citizens "everyday fatigue" – the presiding deity of Long Covid, I suppose. Anyone who sends White a \$74 donation can be freed of his influence, as part of the old charismatic tradition of faith-healing. "Lord, we ask you to deliver our President from any snare, any setup of the enemy, according to Ephesians 6:12. Any persons [or] entities that are aligned against the President will be exposed and dealt with and overturned by the superior blood of Jesus," White intoned during a 2019 prayer call with fellow Christian leaders. "Whether it's the spirit of Leviathan, a spirit of Jezebel, Abaddon, whether it's the spirit of Belial, we come against... that which would operate in sorcery and witchcraft, that which would operate in hidden things, veiled things, that which would operate in deception. We come against it according to your Word."⁵

THE LAST TRUMP

Charismatic Christians in a wider sense are also often keen Trumpers, particularly those belonging to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement, who in the run-up to the election organised a 'Courage Tour' across America to persuade good Christian folk to vote Trump-Vance or else burn in Hell on Earth. The NAR believe Trump is God's chosen "Chaos Candidate", come to create such disruption to the political order in Washington that he will end up ushering in a subsequent period of rule under Evangelical Christian dictatorship, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but better, using what has been termed "a political theology of power".

They believe in a bizarre variant of the 'Long March Through the Institutions' notion that ever since the end of WWII Cultural Marxists have been systematically infiltrating the West's main institutions of civil society to turn us all Commie, gay and Muslim – except that, in the NAR's view, the Cultural Marxists are really Cultural Satanists instead. NAR preach a Gospel called 'The Seven Mountains Mandate', which separates America into being administered by seven key institutional 'mountains' of business, government, media, arts/entertainment, education, family and religion, most of which are currently ruled over by demonic politicians like Jezebel and Leviathan, via their sinister human intermediaries like Joe Biden, the Clintons and Kamala Harris. It is the job of good charismatic Christians to use benign political



ABOVE: Trump dodges an assassin's bullet – a Heaven-sent miracle according to his NAR supporters.

chaos-magicians like Trump to regain institutional control of all Seven Mountains in a Long Counter-March.

Events like Trump's narrow escape from an assassin's bullet (FT448:4-5, 42-45) are interpreted by NAR-ites as miracles sent from Heaven to prove the Donald's sacred nature. An imperfect moral man he may be, but Trump is The Lord's chosen orange vessel nonetheless, and must be given all due aid in the task of draining the Washington swamp not just of mere human corruption, but of the actual accumulated spawn and scum of Gehenna. Trump's Vice President, JD Vance, has attended NAR meetings, while prominent politicians and conservative figures like House Speaker Mike Johnson and Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito have openly flown the NAR banner, which stands in direct contrast to the Jezebel-led Demoncrats' own chosen transgender Pride flag. Some charismatics claim to literally be able to "sniff out" homosexuals, as they smell like demons. Whether this means such persons smell like brimstone or lavender, I would be unable to say. Some NAR Spiritual Warriors were even present at the 6 January Capitol Riots back in 2020, helping to pray the deviant demons away and out of office forever. The NAR may sound comical, but they are surprisingly well funded; their subsidiary non-profit wing Ziklag (it's a Bible reference) was estimated to have spent at least \$12m trying to mobilise Republican turnout for Trump in the run-up to the November ballot.⁶

Does Donald Trump himself actually believe any of this stuff personally, though? Somehow, I doubt it. But, you take your votes where you can get them, I suppose, so I'm sure he's perfectly happy to send such folk misleading but encouraging signals about fighting 'Demoncrats' during his speeches to string them all along. Perhaps, in order to

shore up his charismatic support base even further, his next highly left-field Cabinet pick will be Ghost Hunter Biden?

NOTES

- 1 www.amazon.co.uk/Donald-Trump-Slowly-Becoming-Harmless/dp/B089279YR1; www.amazon.co.uk/Trump-Ghost-Hunter-Paranormal-Adventures/dp/1523777184; www.facebook.com/comeatmeghost/
- 2 www.space.com/41749-elon-musk-living-in-simulation-rogan-podcast.html; www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/elon-musk-grimes-relationship-simulation-b2204948.html; www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/08/robert-f-kennedy-jr-worm-brain; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2j3353vvdvo>
- 3 www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/rfk-shanahan-conspiracy-2024-election-satanic-trump-rcna159473; www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nicole-shanahan-qanon-trump_n_6724f6d9e4b01f6919d9e831
- 4 www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/01/tucker-carlson-demon-attack; www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/04/tucker-carlson-demon-war-room-podcast
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- 6 <https://theconversation.com/new-apostolic-reformation-evangelicals-see-trump-as-gods-warrior-in-their-battle-to-win-america-from-satanic-forces-and-christianize-it-243002>; <https://theconversation.com/the-courage-tour-is-attempting-to-get-christians-to-vote-for-trump-and-focused-on-defeating-demons-241335>; www.splcenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2023/new-dominionism-tries-rule; www.talk2action.org/story/2010/8/6/135752/1937/Front_Page/Strategic_Level_Spiritual_Warfare_SLSW_Glossary

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Black government wagons

MATT SALUSBURY asks if proto-Men in Black were driving steam wagons in HG Wells's *War of the Worlds*...

Ever since Albert K Bender first described his own and other ufologists' encounters with "Men In Black" (MIBs) from 1952 onwards (first documented in Gray Barker's 1956 *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers*) the MIBs have reportedly driven around in shiny, new black cars – often Cadillacs – in their efforts to intimidate and silence UFO witnesses. The cars the Men In Black arrive in are even said to *smell* new. Investigators report their attempts to trace such vehicles from their licence plates reveal no such registration exists. These strange black vehicles were there in MIB mythology from the beginning. Much has been written about how sci-fi imagery prefigures tropes within ufology, while Jenny Randles (FT447:29) has noted that secret experimental military tech and Cold War anxieties affected the UFO phenomenon. I have spotted a turn-of-the 20th century precursor to the shiny, new black cars used to convey the MIBs, from the dawn of science fiction when the genre was still known as "scientific romance."

Book 1, Chapter 12 of HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (TWotW) is entitled "What I saw of the destruction of Weybridge and Shepperton." The narrator witnesses "Three or four black government wagons, with crosses in white circles, and an old omnibus, among other vehicles, were being loaded in the village street."

Could the "black government wagons" – noticeable and identifiable, needing no further explanation to the readers of



LEFT: A Foden Steam Lorry in the service of the North Yorkshire County surveyor, c. 1920.

Could the black government wagons have been steam wagons?

1897 – have wormed their way into the collective subconscious to give rise to MIB lore? And what could the "black government wagons" have been, at a time when "government" was much smaller than it is now?

Horse-drawn black police wagons to haul away detainees were a thing as early as the 1860s, with engravings from the *Illustrated Police News* and other publications showing Fenians attempting to hijack such vehicles and rescue condemned prisoners. But such incidents were three decades before TWotW, first serialised in 1897 by Pearson magazine before publication as a book soon after, with the action taking place starting on a then near-future New Year's Eve 1899. Surviving photos or illustrations of dark-coloured police wagons in the late 1890s seem rare.

And anyway, they were black government wagons, not police wagons, in TWotW. They don't seem to have been ambulances either, or surely they would have been described as having *red* crosses on them. Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill in their 2003 *The*

League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Vol II retelling of TWotW portray the Extraordinary Gentlemen themselves emerging from a sinister, shiny, hearse-like black carriage bearing "VR" initials and a crown. An equally glossy black two-door Hansom cab bedecked with Masonic compasses and set square conveys spymaster Campion Bond.

In those days, "government" basically meant military, foreign policy or espionage. New and suitably sinister government agencies then forming could have deployed Wells's black government wagons. The Special Irish Branch of the Metropolitan Police, set up in 1883 to combat the "Fenian menace", was at the time of TWotW transforming into Special Branch, a new political police force to combat what's now called "domestic extremism". It would soon be tussling with the Suffragettes, in a conflict which produced the first ever covert police surveillance photos.

Invasion paranoia was in the air too. Wells parodied a rich vein of "invasion literature", kicked off in 1871 by George Tomkyns Chesney's bestseller *The Battle of Dorking*, in which Germans invade England's south coast. Some 60 "invasion literature" works followed, although by the time TWotW appeared, the invader was more likely French or Russian.

Could the black government wagons have been *steam* wagons? The Thornycroft Steam Carriage had been in production since 1895, with Chiswick Council using one as a dust cart. Meanwhile, the Fodor's Steam Vehicle – a traction engine with a space like a flat-bed truck at the back – was used in Army trials at the end of the 19th century. Contemporary monochrome photos show the Steam Vehicle in a dark colour. The Foden Steam Lorry made its appearance in 1900, with War Office trials of the vehicle the following year; it also appeared in a dark colour in contemporary photos. The Lancashire Steam Motor Company (later Leyland) was already turning out steam vans by then, while the *Automotor and Horseless Vehicle Journal* had been circulating since 1896.

That dark coloured paint job for contemporary "government wagons", though, could have been khaki. The militia and yeomanry units massacred by Martian heat rays in TWotW would have been the last British army units to go to war wearing redcoats. Khaki uniforms had already made their appearance on the battlefield for regular units fighting in the Boer War in 1900. Steam lorries still in use at the outbreak of World War One, with "WD Roads" stencilled on the side, are known to have been painted in khaki. In any event, it's intriguing to find the shiny black vehicles conveying the Men in Black prefigured over a half century earlier, with fictional "black government wagons" deployed in response to the equally fictional incursions of extraterrestrials.

♦ **MATT SALUSBURY** is a regular FT contributor and the author of *Mystery Animals of Suffolk* (2023).

COLIN WATERS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Heads will roll

As a surprise Hallowe'en treat, the BBC Archive's official YouTube channel uploaded a 1976 news report that had become a holy grail for square-eyed fortune tellers – *Nationwide*'s disturbing teatime feature on the infamous "Hexham Heads". **BOB FISCHER** meets the archive's GREG McKEVITT, whose diligent detective work resulted in the unearthing of this long-buried TV treasure

"The first I heard of the Hexham Heads was a couple of years ago, just through online chatter," says Greg McKevitt, content producer for BBC Archive. "I saw mention of the footage existing in the archive and obviously my ears pricked up. *Nationwide* was such an unusual programme, and it's been fertile ground for our social media team. We've been posting clips from it for many years now."

The Hexham Heads themselves? The central figures in a story that continues to baffle and fascinate in equal measure. In 1971, brothers Colin and Leslie Robson unearthed two small, carved stone heads in their Northumberland garden, and the discovery sparked a torrent of outlandish supernatural claims. There were reports that the Robson family had experienced a flurry of poltergeist-like activity in their home, with bottles flying and the heads themselves changing position when left unattended. For neighbour Nelly Dodd, the repercussions of the discovery were even more alarming: she claimed to have been visited during the night by a bizarre half man/half sheep creature (for comprehensive *FT* coverage, see **FT294:42-47**, **295:44-49**).



By early 1972, the story had made its way into the local newspapers. "Eerie tale of the two idol heads" was the headline in Newcastle's *The Journal* on Friday 3 March. The report quoted "one of the country's top Celtic experts" Dr Ann (sic) Ross, and claimed the heads were "probably used for worship by a Celtic tribe 1,800 years ago". That same day, the city's *Evening Chronicle* ran a similar story under the headline "Terror from the Celtic mists", with Anne Ross speculating that the Robson family's council house may have been built on the site of "an old Celtic shrine or burial ground". Two years later, the story was still rumbling, with Dr Ross now reporting her own terrifying nocturnal visitation. In *The Journal* of 14 January 1974 she claimed to have been visited by a bona fide lycanthrope: "half-human, half beast, like a werewolf".

However, it was the report by BBC1 current affairs programme *Nationwide*, broadcast on Friday 20 February 1976, that cemented this curious tale in the psyche of a generation. In a filmed insert, journalist Luke Casey stressed the importance of the severed head in ancient Celtic iconography, before interviewing Colin and Leslie's mother Jenny Robson and Dr Anne Ross herself. Casey also suggested that the supernatural visitations sparked by the Hexham Heads could potentially be explained by the stone carvings themselves harbouring centuries-



She claimed to have been visited by a bona fide lycanthrope

old psychic echoes of Celtic brutality, a theory not dissimilar to that expounded in Nigel Kneale's infamous 1972 BBC drama *The Stone Tape*.

In the intervening decades, this 10-minute news report took on its own mythical status. The footage was even rumoured to have been lost completely, with traumatised 1970s youngsters only able to draw on their own fading memories of the story. Until, that is, Hallowe'en 2024. On the morning of Thursday 31 October, the entire Hexham Heads report suddenly appeared unannounced on the BBC Archive YouTube channel (see **FT452:6**). It was the result of some diligent detective work by Greg McKevitt himself.

"When I heard about the

LEFT: Dr Anne Ross. BELOW LEFT: The BBC Archive's Greg McKevitt. BELOW: What was hopefully just a prop head on a spike.



COURTESY BBC ARCHIVE

Hexham Heads, I looked to see if the footage existed," explains Greg. "Although full editions of *Nationwide* weren't normally preserved, lots of the film inserts had been saved in various degrees of completeness. For decades, they would have been sitting as physical film on a dusty shelf in Perivale, but over the last 10 years or so there's been a mass digitisation of content in the BBC archive. And it's now all gone into a system that is searchable.

"It was buried away, and it took a bit of tracing. But lo and behold, I found the footage. There was a problem, though – it was mute. So although I'd seen the report being talked about as the holy grail of paranormal footage, it actually felt a bit underwhelming seeing it without the audio. It was 10 minutes long with no real context as to what was happening. It went from shots of Celtic stone heads to footage of Hadrian's Wall with weird, severed heads on stakes! There were interviews with people that we couldn't identify, although they later turned out to be Jenny Robson and Dr Anne Ross. And then, bafflingly, at the end – why was Luke Casey holding up a cassette tape?"

The solution would come, heart-warmingly, from a 48-year old edition of *FT*.

"We sat upon the footage until a couple of months ago, when we were talking about what we could do with our social media for Hallowe'en," continues Greg.

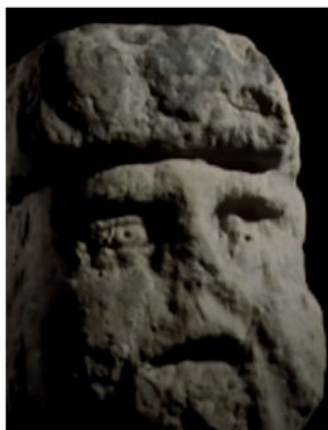


COURTESY BBC ARCHIVE

ABOVE LEFT: Jenny Robson. ABOVE RIGHT: *Nationwide* reporter Luke Casey puts forward his own *Stone Tape* theory. BELOW: One of the carved stone heads used by *Nationwide* to illustrate the story. BOTTOM: FT's Steve Moore, whose transcription of the broadcast in *Fortean Times* 15 (below right) helped turn up the missing audio.

"Then I started to do a bit more digging. There's a small community of Hexham Heads enthusiasts online, with some fantastic blogs that go into great detail. And I discovered that Issue 15 of *FT*, dated April 1976, contained pretty much a verbatim transcript of the full *Nationwide* audio. So I thought that if I could trace a copy, then we might be able to re-voice the whole thing for YouTube. I bought a compilation of Issues 1-15, and it filled in so many blanks.

"But then... part of the digitisation of the archive has involved running voice recognition software across some of the programmes, and that gives us an extra means of searching them for individual quotes. So with *FT* Issue 15 in my hand, I actually started searching the archive for a few different phrases from the transcript. And one of them came up trumps! It was a quote from Dr Anne Ross about the werewolf she saw: "the lower part was human"! I could only find the missing audio from the second half of the report, but it had most of Anne Ross's quotes, as well as Luke Casey's theory about *The Stone Tape*. "It was a mind-blowing discovery for us. It was tagged onto the end of a programme called *Under Bow Bells*, broadcast on 29 Feb 1976. "A series of dialogues from St Mary-Le-Bone, introduced by the Reverend Joseph McCulloch"! At the end, the colour tone bars came up and then the missing audio from the Hexham Heads report



kicked in from nowhere."

Greg admits he has no idea why the absent audio was located on the end of a completely unrelated religious programme, but says he is excited at the possibility of this new search facility ultimately being used to locate the first half of the missing soundtrack. "I have tried!" he insists. "There's been nothing so far, but I haven't given up."

In the meantime, the Hexham Heads report on the BBC Archive YouTube channel is as complete a version as is currently possible. The missing audio – from approximately the opening five minutes of the insert – is replaced by narration from Greg himself, using

Steve Moore's transcription from *FT* 15:4-5 as source material. The footage itself, meanwhile, is as originally broadcast: with the exception of the opening titles from *The Stone Tape*, added by Greg to provide



useful context. The report as a whole makes for gruesome viewing, with the Celtic fascination for beheading indeed illustrated by shots of (hopefully) prop heads on spikes, and Dr Anne Ross's account of her own terrifying visitation punctuated by a sudden cut to a howling Oliver Reed in furry-faced make-up: a clip from the 1961 Hammer horror film, *The Curse Of The Werewolf*.

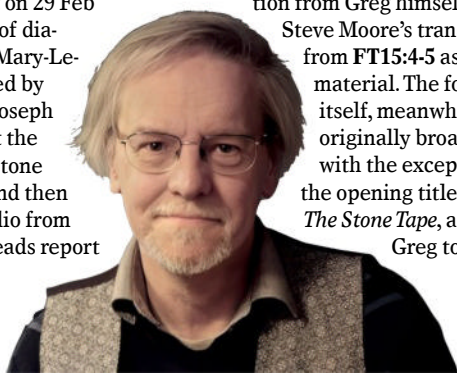
There is, however, one glaring omission from the report: footage of the heads themselves. The carved stone heads used on *Nationwide* to illustrate the story are not the originals. Even by 1976, their whereabouts was a mystery, although a story published by *The Journal* on 1 May 1975 suggested they were on their way back to Jenny Robson, who intended to "bury them back in the garden where they belong". And that mysterious cassette tape? It's used by Luke Casey to illustrate his own *Stone Tape* theory. "Can it be possible that

horrible experiences that happened thousands of years ago can somehow be imprinted or recorded in a stone head and then sort of played back when something comes along to trigger them off?" he asks *Nationwide* viewers. "It sounds fanciful in the extreme, but then supposing somebody had told one of the great composers that – hundreds of years after his death – an entire symphony could be captured on a little thing like this..."

For Greg McKeivitt, the BBC Archive has almost provided its own *Stone Tape*, with the reconstituted *Nationwide* report bringing this long-lost example of suburban weirdness back into the public arena to haunt a whole new generation. At time of writing, a fortnight after being uploaded onto YouTube, the footage has already racked up over 16,000 views. "People of a certain age were really traumatised by this thing, and had built it up in their memory," smiles Greg. "I'd even seen people talking about getting a crowd-funder together to pay for the footage! I just love the idea of these things existing in the folk memory, waiting to be unearthed. One of the great privileges of this job is to be able to bring things like this to people."

Nationwide's Hexham Heads report can viewed on the BBC Archive Youtube channel at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4WXop9q1IU

❖ **BOB FISCHER** is *FT*'s regular 'Haunted Generation' correspondent.



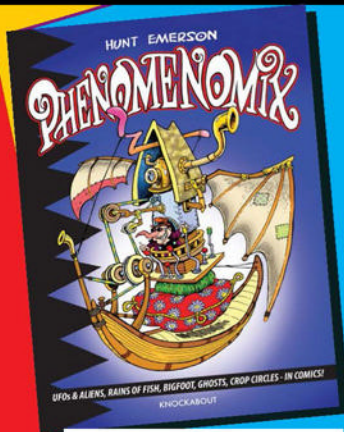


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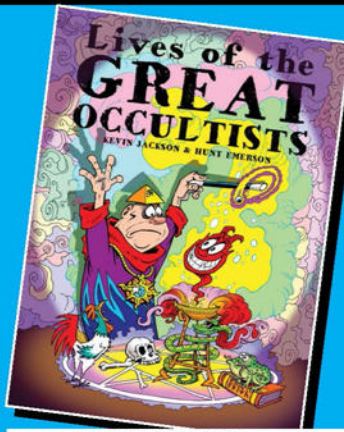


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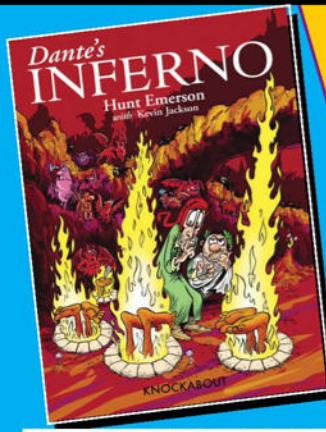
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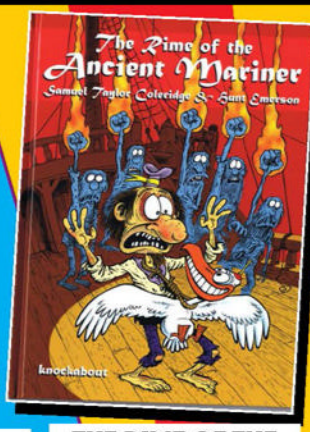
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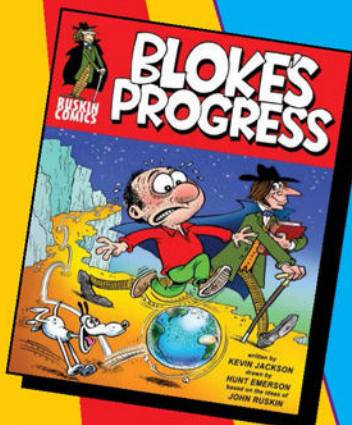
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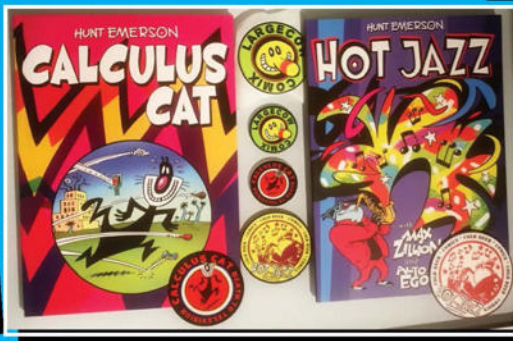
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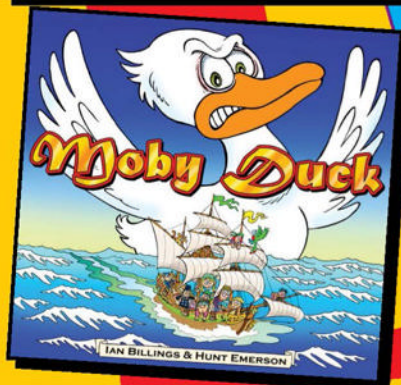
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The 'truth about UFOs' – yet again

This much-vaunted US military whistleblower on UFOs has nothing new to say, says **David Clarke** – and his tru-believer book is riddled with glaring errors

Imminent

Inside the Pentagon's hunt for UFOs

Luis Elizondo

Bonnier/John Blake Publishing 2024

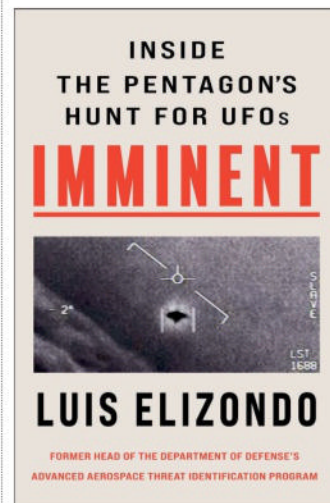
Hb, 275pp, £22, ISBN 9781789466041

Early in this book Luis ("Lue") Elizondo describes his initiation into the Pentagon's cabal of UFO enthusiasts: "Like Neo in the movie *The Matrix*, I inhaled that red pill. 'Tell me more!'" Sadly, the antidote to that red pill – a dose of healthy scepticism – completely eludes the author for the remainder of this much-hyped addition to the library of disclosure literature.

Elizondo goes to great pains to persuade us he is a straight-forward military man, with a background in science (see Nigel Watson's summary in **FT448: 26-27** for more biographical info). But scratch the surface and some seriously weird stuff emerges. An entire chapter is devoted to mysterious glowing orbs that flit around his suburban home after he joins the UFO unit. His invitation to act as head of security for the UFO project comes about because of an earlier stint as a psychic spy with the CIA's remote viewing project (see **FT186: 34-44**). He describes himself as "spiritual" and his New Agey ideas are never far from the surface beneath the tough military veneer.

Born in Texas in 1971, he served in the US Army for 20 years as a Counter-intelligence Special Agent. But his carefully crafted biography tells us little about what his role actually was (or is). This book is essentially a memoir that begins with Elizondo's recruitment in 2009 into the Pentagon's ever-changing alphabet soup of UFO programmes. He claims that during the eight

years he was involved (he resigned in 2017) he saw clear footage of UFOs captured by US military pilots. His account of these now classic Pentagon-authenticated images forms the central plank of this narrative. Everything else he mentions is either "friend of a friend" stories that are familiar to folklorists or hints at conclusive evidence that cannot be discussed because it is "classified". But within days of the release of *Imminent*, sceptic Mick West, on YouTube, forensically scrutinised each of Elizondo's claims about four of the Pentagon videos. He found the author's claims about each one are "riddled with errors". This is not a promising



start given this footage forms the backbone of the entire book.

Nevertheless, Elizondo's belief that the US Navy footage shows something extraordinary, beyond human capability, converted him from sceptic to believer. This "conversion" narrative is like that of Nick Pope in his 1996 memoir *Open Skies Closed Minds*. The earliest example is Ed Ruppelt's 1956 *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* that provided an insight into the workings of

His New Agey ideas are never far from the surface beneath the tough military veneer

an earlier US Government UFO project, Blue Book.

Essentially, nothing much has changed, apart from the tone and urgency of the disclosure message: "These craft are not made by humans," Elizondo boldly states in his introduction. "Humanity is in fact *not* the only intelligent life in the universe, and *not* the alpha species." The UFO "craft" – now called Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAP) by the US military – have been operating with "complete impunity all over the world since at least World War II" and have the ability "to move in ways that defy our knowledge of physics ... within air, water and space".

Elizondo says a lot about breaking out of his military silo to investigate alternative explanations, but when he does these are all far-out, non-falsifiable ideas of the type promoted by John Keel and Jacques Vallée. There is no sign that he is willing to consider that some military reports are of ordinary objects seen in extraordinary circumstances.

Elsewhere, the book beats a familiar path to the door of the Roswell incident and the legends that claim the US Government is hiding wreckage and bodies from a dozen UFO crash retrievals dating back to the 1940s. He uncritically regurgitates a version of the Roswell story, handily passed on by his contacts in the CIA, where a "Legacy programme" – much like the one depicted in *The X-Files* – is "in possession of

advanced technology made off world by non-human intelligences". Although he is aware of SF movies it does not appear to have occurred to him how similar these stories are to the over-arching plotlines devised by Chris Carter and contemporary pop culture writers.

As a first-time author Elizondo is either a skilled storyteller or his publishers have helped him transform his role into an enjoyable romp through some of the Pentagon's weirder secrets. His credibility is not helped by the impression that *Imminent* was written in a hurry. It is riddled with some glaring errors (e.g. he says a Mayan king is immortalised riding a spaceship on an ancient tomb slab in Peru when a basic Google search should have located it at Palenque in Mexico). His freestyle re-writing of some classic UFO incidents, such as the 1980 Rendlesham Forest "encounter" in Suffolk, also suggests a superficial reading of the UFO literature as opposed to any real privileged access to unseen secret material.

Will Elizondo be remembered as a courageous whistleblower who broke the biggest story in the history of mankind? Or will he be added to the list of many others who predicted the imminent landing of aliens on the White House lawn? What I have read so far, and gleaned from Elizondo's carefully stage-managed public appearances, does not make me want to run to the hills. But it does leave me concerned about how easily rumours and legends can invade the corridors of power. This book reveals that Elizondo and his friends are just as susceptible to believing rumours, friend-of-a-friend stories and pseudo-scientific claims as the average person in the street.

★ ★

An occult curate's egg

Factually sound, but fails to catch the interest, says **Jay Vickers** – but the artwork is good

Occult

Decoding the Visual Culture of Mysticism, Magic & Divination

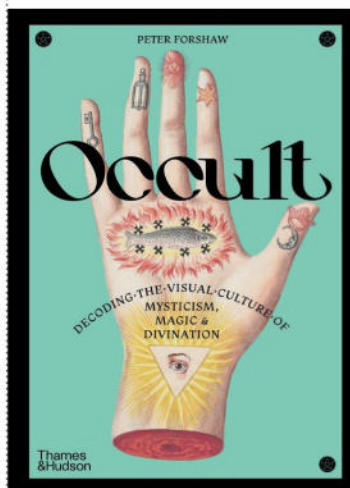
Peter Forshaw

Thames & Hudson 2024

Hb, 256pp, £25, ISBN 9780500027134

This book does pretty much what it says on the tin – and coming from Thames & Hudson, it's a visual delight, with colour illustrations on nearly every page.

Author Peter Forshaw is a Professor of Western esotericism at the University of Amsterdam. The story of the occult, he says: "is a story of mankind's



fascination with wonders and marvels, initiations into secrets and the seeking-out of hidden things".

The term "occult philosophy" was first used by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa in 1510; practitioners over the centuries included philosophers, physicians, theologians, mathematicians and other learned men. The Age of Reason and Enlightenment is often thought "to have sounded the death knell for occult philosophy"; instead, he says, it merely "withdrew from the public eye"; early scientists such as Robert Boyle and Sir Isaac Newton are known to have practised alchemy. The 19th and 20th centuries saw a growth in esoteric thought and practice in Freemasonry and

Rosicrucianism, the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and other groups, and their many offshoots today.

So far so standard: a sound, scholarly, straightforward history of Western occultism, with illustrations closely related to the text. The first section of the book covers the history and development of astrology, alchemy and Kabbalah; the second discusses occult philosophy under natural magic, astral magic and ritual magic. Ritual or ceremonial magic, he says, is a "far more contentious and potentially more perilous kind of magical practice" involving the summoning and control of demons or the invocation of angels. But throughout, it's a somewhat over-factual history, at times reading like an outline of lectures.

The third section explores the occult revival under occultism, Tarot, New Age and occulture. Forshaw skims through the Golden Dawn, Crowley and the OTO in just over three pages – and it's rather troubling that he states as a fact: "Other well-known Golden Dawn members were the Irish poet and dramatist WB Yeats (1865-1939) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), creator of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes." Yeats, very much so; but there is no reliable evidence that Conan Doyle was ever a member; he tends to appear on the same completely speculative lists that (incorrectly) have Bram Stoker and even HP Lovecraft as members.

The book finishes up with an eclectic but somewhat scattershot overview of occulture, briefly name-checking everyone from Leonora Carrington, Jimmy Page and David Bowie to Dan Brown and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

A great selection of images, but the complete lack of sparkle or colour in the text makes it – quite remarkably considering the subject matter – a rather stodgy read.

★★★

Song of the Dark Man

Father of Witches, Lord of the Crossroads

Darragh Mason

Destiny Books 2024

Pb, 208pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781644119099

The Song of the Dark Man: Father of Witches, Lord of the Crossroads, Darragh Mason's vibrant exploration of historical and contemporary accounts of the Devil, is a book of two parts, woven through Mason's own encounters with the Dark Man. The first is a fast-paced British and Irish cultural history that takes neither genre nor chronology into account. It's an invitation to dive in and follow the cyclical and overlapping dances, where coherence is found through the emotional – and often frightening – esoteric storytelling.

These span folktales that recall sightings of the Devil, haunted by dreams over millennia, whether footsteps over south Devon or the terrifying figure of Spring-heeled Jack leaping from Victorian England to the 21st century; popular culture, with a reminder that the Devil has all the best tunes; the Dark Man as shape-shifter makes an appearance through the story



of Oisín the little fawn; the Dark Man is found in cave art indicating dream worlds and primal creativity; as Witch Father he returns in European witchcraft confessions as a form of shamanistic practice. While often disturbing, this is not the Devil of Judæo-Christian nightmares.

The second section presents eight testimonies, including Mason's, that explore contemporary relationships with the Dark Man under different names and guises. The two parts are interconnected and cross-referenced, for example David Beth's analysis of Master Leonard's writings reveals sharp similarities to Isobel Gowdie's witchcraft confessions in 17th-century Scotland.

Mason starts with a riff on the old joke about asking for directions in rural Ireland, only to be told, "Well, I wouldn't start from here," to illustrate the metaphors and contradictions that follow an exploration of the Devil as part

trickster, part shapeshifter, part force of nature. The Dark Man brings "epistemological rewilding", inspiring creativity through chaos, and for those who listen, insights and agency, even the mystery of Witchblood.

I read this book the conventional way, starting at the beginning and progressing in an orderly manner, and it's fascinating and thought-provoking. However, by the time I reached the final – and pivotal – meeting with the Lord of the Crossroads that pushed Mason to embark on this project, I reconsidered my approach. If I could meet this book for the first time again, I'd start with the testimonies. Only then, once fully immersed in the experiences described here, would I turn to the context for the epic myths, folklore, and historical encounters through which the cross-cultural presence of the Dark Man emerges. While Mason's initial comment points to the Devil's trickery – in hindsight it might hint that you too, dear reader, should not start from here.

Helen Cornish

★★★★

Atlas of Paranormal Places

A Journey to the World's Most Supernatural Places

Evelyn Hollow

Ivy Press/Quarto 2024

Hb, 224pp, £22, ISBN 9780711287969

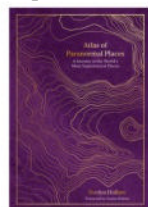
In Veracruz, Mexico, a high sorcerer stands on the water's edge of Lake Catemaco, leading a black mass as an ill-fated animal takes its final steps ahead of its ritualistic death, marking the start of an international festival of witchcraft. In Italy, morbid secrets await under the lush vegetation of Poveglia Island, as plague victims and the patients of its now-derelict mental asylum populate its ghostly Otherworld. In *Atlas of Paranormal Places*, parapsychologist Evelyn Hollow reminds readers of our planet's darker histories, and explores humanity's age-old fascination with "the unknown, unseen and sometimes untenable aspects" of existence.

In this richly researched guide of the world's most supernatural destinations, Hollow combines immersive storytelling with historical fact and captivating cultural beliefs. Divided into six categories, including haunted



places, witchcraft, sacred sites, myths and legends, strange nature and cryptids and creatures, the book presents over 35 macabre locations, interspersed with bewitching, moodily edited photographs, from the sweeping landscapes of Iceland's phantom mud pools to the fog-covered geometric forms of Indonesia's abandoned Borobudur Temple.

Known for her astutely analytical perspectives on the popular podcast series *Uncanny* (hosted by Danny Robbins, who also pens the book's foreword), Hollow carries over the same investigative and level-headed approach from her time delving into the ghostly experiences of the show's inter-



viewees, threading various entries with both natural and otherworldly explanations for their forteen reputations. The book is suitable for believers in the paranormal and sceptics alike, with Hollow's refreshingly no-nonsense prose serving as teacher and challenger, making us rethink our preconceptions about the stories we've been told and the places that birth them; Slovakia's Cachtice Castle receives a proposed historical rewrite as resident alleged serial killer Elizabeth Báthory becomes instead a victim of political propaganda, and the spectral atmosphere of Japan's Aokigahara "suicide" Forest may owe more to its underlying lava formations than the tragic events that surround it. Still, Hollow leaves each question open to interpretation; are these places really haunted, and why?

The book's greatest strength is its extensive incorporation of knowledge: from the categorisations of Japanese entities and Islamic geographies of Hell, to the inclusion of paranormal and philosophical ideas, such as the stone tape theory and confirmation bias. A couple of entries get convoluted by the level of dense information, so that the destination itself gets somewhat overlooked. Nevertheless, *Atlas of Paranormal Places* is an essential read. Though containing a scattering of well-known forteen locations, including the aforementioned suicide woodland hotspot, Skinwalker Ranch and

Pendle Hill, the book holds a largely unique selection, and undoubtedly will contribute to numerous travel bucket lists of both the avid dark tourist and the merely curious.

Liz Scarlett

★★★★

The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings

European Traditions

Ed. Simon Young & Davide Erracora

University of Exeter Press 2024. 30 per cent discount with code FORTEAN30 from exeterpress.co.uk

Hb, 352pp, £100, ISBN 9781804131046

Fairies are back, and more complicated than ever. *FT* readers will be aware of the recent resurgence, which has been well charted by regular contributor Simon Young (one of the editors here). But the modern "Tinker Bell" type is somewhat at odds with the fairies of traditional lore. Not least of the differences is that rather than some small, Disney-type winged figure (usually female), traditional fairies belong to integrated and hierarchical magical social communities of supernatural beings living in symbiosis with their human neighbours. "The time will come for Tinker Bell's history to be



written," the editors note, but this volume provides a detailed introduction to those older social communities.

Fourteen dedicated chapters by a roll-call of some big names in European folklore studies (many likely already familiar to *FT* readers) take us across Europe from the Celtic west to the Slavic east, the Norse north to the Latin south. The focus is on local traditions, with the editors commendably choosing to foreground native taxonomies rather than universal categorising, but this brings out the porosity of such traditions and categorisations. The editors work with five attributes that characterise their "social supernatural" – choral action, hierarchies, visitable shared homes, symbiosis

and distinct personalities – while acknowledging that these vary between the groups described.

The authors all work to explain this social world, whether society or collective, in its own terms. At the same time, such categorisation also brings out how such traditions bleed into each other, both geographically at their borders and temporally, as new traditions emerge and develop. Some of the traditions themselves complicate any clear-cut definitions, with Tommy Kuusela noting that trolls "blur categories" and Éva Pócs pointing to a crossover with witch traditions. Treating traditional fairy societies as a coherent eco-system means that Matthias Egeler, commenting on the incorporation of the newer "flower fairy" into Icelandic tradition, effectively posits Tinker Bell as an invasive species. Some of these reflections take us into other territory interesting to forteans. Dorian Juri sees the Serbian *vile* as more "hidden" than fairy, while Pócs points to narratives of dream communications between worlds and tales of fairy abduction.

Juri notes how some previous folklorists saw fairies as a liminal zone between humans and some other realm, but that this does not really work for lived experience. *Vile*, he writes, "exist on earth as a mirror opposite to human society". The strength of this collection is the way it introduces us to such other, mirroring societies.

Paul Cowdell

★★★★

Fairy Encounters in Medieval England

Landscape, Folklore and the Supernatural

Jeremy Harte

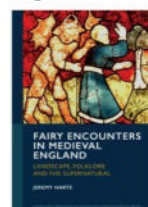
University of Exeter Press 2024. 30 per cent discount with code FORTEAN30 from exeterpress.co.uk

Hb, 222pp, £90, ISBN 9781804130957

Historian and folklorist Jeremy Harte has followed up the sublime *Cloven Country* with another masterpiece of supernatural encounters and haunted landscapes. *Fairy Encounters in Medieval England* is, as its title suggests, a detailed and well-researched collection of recorded oral testimonies by mediæval chroniclers. These encounters, as readers of *Fortean Times* may imagine, are

anything but fairytales! The supernatural breaks through into this world in many forms such as the demons that come "as a bag of straw, a headless, footless, limbless thing, a bristling hairy shagginess, a shape shooting up from the ground".

The book's killer opening sentence immediately lures us in. "Many people nowadays hope to see a fairy; many in the Middle Ages wished they never had." For these fairies are more likely to slit your throat, twist your neck or gouge out your eyes than grant a wish. Harte's accessible and engaging prose makes the reader feel as though she was the actual witness to those who faced the supernatural and somehow sur-



vived. Testimonies are so convincing and sensorially detailed that we accept their truth, as when spirits appear after the

sound of ducks splashing in the river or come to one through the barley rippling in the field...

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is that it precisely illustrates how fairy encounters were once an accepted part of the everyday. Spirits were deeply embedded within mediæval culture and could easily be encountered at the market or just outside the town gate, rather than in some remote wild landscape. They would interact with you, touch you, attack you, co-exist with you.

For scholars of fairies, the historical supernatural and the haunted landscape, this is a must-read.

Visceral account after visceral account of the walking dead, fairy abductions, demon lovers, reveal themselves on each page; although we must accept that we can never truly understand why. The difficulty, as Harte eloquently posits, when writing about elfin place names is that they are like "labels without the luggage".

We may not know who the fairies were, nor why they appeared, but we are left in no doubt as to how they affected those who were subjected to encounters.

To leave the final word to Jeremy Harte: "This has been a book of things that happened."

Olivia Armstrong

★★★★

How can we save our planet?

Rob Ixer looks at two sobering examinations of how mankind has damaged nature, and what we might do to repair it

Nature's Ghosts

The world we lost and how to bring it back again

Sophie Yeo

HarperNorth 2024

Hb, 320pp, £22, ISBN 9780008474126

The Story of Nature

A human history

Jeremy Mynott

Yale University Press 2024

Hb, 376pp, £25, ISBN 9780300245653

Standing on the (probable) brink of the Earth's sixth major extinction event, (the last was 65 million years ago by the dinosaur-destroying Chicxulub meteor) and irreversible climate change, these two books discuss the same existential questions: what have we done and what should we now do, with "the wild"/"nature"/the environment and how can/should we ameliorate the past and future damage? Both books are easy but uncomfortable reads. Sophie Yeo's unillustrated book is the lesser; it is a very personalised gravid and grave account researched whilst pregnant and written by a young mother fearful for her daughter's future. Indeed, the book, the result of a series of field visits and conversations, is essentially a series of expositions showing floral and faunal restitutions or more "cultural" ones as in returning to ancient farming techniques in the Vile, Gower, and preserving ice fishing techniques in North Karelia.

Despite acknowledging the impossibility, she advocates returning to an older world to take our place as a (benign/responsible) keystone species, but she acknowledges that rewilding is not simple and the law of unforeseen consequences often applies. Central to her book is the question of how far back should we adopt the "natural" baseline – 500, 2000 or 10,000 years ago – noting that with every generation there is a diminution and downgrading of natural diversity:

the Shifting Baselines Syndrome. Should present-day chip-stealing Scarborough seagulls be replaced by those of crust-nicking Cockney kites as in Tudor times or further back? Should areas be returned to pre-agricultural times, essentially the pre-Neolithic, with the European Bison taking the place of lost aurochs?

Jeremy Mynott's book stands back, is grander, deeply researched, solidly academic and masterful; beautifully written, it is genuinely compulsive and persuasive reading, wonderfully illustrated and enriching... and profound. He systematically describes and illustrates the changing relationship between mankind and wild and tamed fauna, beginning with the magical cave paintings of Spain and France; the depiction of agriculture in Egyptian tombs, (the Neolithic revolution including animal husbandry was and remains the single most important event determining the relationship between humans and the rest of nature); the biblical Genesis licence to exploit/dominate other species with its influence remaining long into late mediæval times; and finally "taming" nature by classifying its components.

Birds fly on almost every page (Mynott is a life-long twitcher). The North American passenger pigeon's passage from being the most abundant bird on the continent – flocks "hundreds of miles long" – to slaughtered extinction in two centuries is just one of the incidents in what is probably the most absorbing of Mynott's historical chapters: the greedy interaction between Europeans and the wilderness that was the USA, "How the West was Lost" (by Lust) but then partially re-won by the invention of National Parks. There is the irony that American Indians (even being the vector for an invasive species, the horse) were living the sustainable

"natural" existence now advocated and championed.

His last three chapters discuss our recent and present position. Chapter 8 describes the setting up and evolution of nature conservation bodies from their 19th-century aristocratic beginnings (outlawing milliners from using bird feathers) to the more egalitarian Extinction Rebellion. "Choices" asks what criteria do we, and should we, use for salvation: abundance and biodiversity, charismatic furies or perceived economic value, noting that the last is politically the most powerful. His short final chapter deals with more abstract extinctions: the loss of world languages, the progressive loss of "nature literacy" (recognising and identifying plants/animals to the species level) alongside losing our sense of wonder at "Nature". He purposely declines to finish with conclusions and recommendations, other than to uncouple climate change from

habitat loss and biodiversity crises.

It is a very sober read; you may never wish to taste alcohol again, but spirits are lightened by a cocktail of poetry slices – the background to Wordsworth's daffodils is expounded; by facts – together mankind and cattle vastly out-weigh all other fauna; the now invasive Buddleia was introduced into Britain's gardens in the 1890s (Himalayan Balsam in 1839); and intoxicating anecdotes – in the top left corner of the dust cover to *Silent Spring* there is a pool of rippling water; seemingly the illustrator misunderstood the title.

Although a greater discussion of non-Western perspectives would have been useful, Mynott has written a major book; it will not make the same impact as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) or the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), but it should.

Yeo ★ ★ ★

Mynott ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Spiritualisms' Scandal

Mediumship in America 1960

Gerald O'Hara

KDP/Amazon 2024

Pb, 200pp, £15.92, ISBN 9798879385120

Promising an insight into the darker side of the Spiritualist movement in America, Gerald O'Hara's history of the collapse of the *Psychic Observer* newspaper in 1961 and the part played by Spiritualist autocrat Mabel Riffle (1877-1961) is more *Carry On* than *Panorama* in its exposés.

At the heart of the tale is Camp Chesterfield, Indiana, a Spiritualist enclave, and medium Mable Riffle, who transformed the community into a lucrative business enterprise. O'Hara details Riffle's machinations as she exerted control over resident mediums following her appointment as camp commandant in 1910. Intense financial investment followed – capitalising on the postwar revival of Spiritualism – and Camp Chesterfield became a go-to destination for ectoplasmic revelations.

The bubble burst when *Psychic Observer* editor Tom O'Neill and parapsychological expert Dr Andrija Puharich embarked upon a project to film material manifestations in 1961. O'Neill, a friend of Riffle, was sorely disappointed as the evidence amounted to badly-wrought trickery rather than the proof positive he sought!

O'Neill chose to publish his findings, to the horror of the Spiritualist community at large, and Riffle embarked upon a campaign of revenge. Unable to resist her financial and coercive control of the Spiritualist industry, the newspaper folded in 1961, though it was later relaunched. Riffle remained unapologetic to the very end and stage-managed her reputation until her death in 1966.

O'Hara's account is in parts repetitive, hyperbolic, and disjointed, which works against a very local story of "psychic warfare" that is inherently entertaining and a tad absurd. With multiple appendices, biographical details and a bibliography, this work is arguably for a specialist audience.

Chris Hill

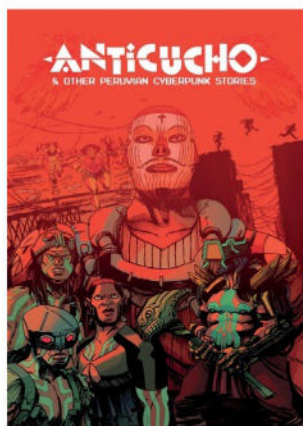
★★★

★★★



COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Anticucho and Other Peruvian Cyberpunk Stories

Gustaffo Vargas
Tacu-Tinta Press (www.gustaffovargas.com/store)

Pb, 88pp, £15, ISBN 9781738547715

Cyberpunk has a very special place in my heart. After so many years it is an incredibly hard genre to do something fresh with, and with *Anticucho*, Gustaffo Vargas has absolutely, 100 per cent, succeeded.

Rather than just lifting cyberpunk from its usual pan-US/Japanese setting and adding a touch of Peruvian flavouring, the Lima setting is integral to these stories: they could only take place in Peru, and bring together the country's street culture, architecture, mythology and natural history – for example, in the form of *gallinazos*, the black vultures common in Lima and repurposed here as cyborg drones.

The stories themselves are heartfelt, based around the friendships of the Pirañas and their struggles against the Los Chavines gang, with their mix of pre-Incan culture and ritual, and the Ukuku Clan.

The biotech is well realised, and grows out of the setting naturally rather than being imposed on it, brought to life in the artwork with colour flats by Laura Dragon and a flow of panels that perfectly captures the urban scene.

My absolute favourite story

was the highly creative “Anticucho”, that uses stunning panel work, as well as the de Luca effect (telling a story across a page rather than in individual panels), to create something really special. Then to raise it to another level, Vargas adds in references to the aromas of food scenting the scenes throughout the story, a remarkable device that will no doubt have readers hungry for some Peruvian cooking.

If you love truly inventive cyberpunk, this is definitely the comic for you!

Arks Vol 1, Arks #4 & #5, Arks Proximan #1

Rory Collins, Natalie Malla, Erich Owen, Andrew Morris
Clicky Sprout Wife (www.clickysproutwife.com/shop)

£8-£25 (print or digital)

With the distance between planets unbridgeable, humanity uses directed pan-spermia to terraform exoplanets, sending out genomes encoded in bacteria. These unfurl 30,000 species,

including humans who remain confused until their previous personalities are burnt in.

Arks Volume One is a story built around hard science, with an understanding of just how brutally humanity can change the environments it wants to inhabit. This is a beautifully visceral story, with the work of

all the artists involved perfectly capturing the mucus-and-septic-wound-inflected existence of Joe and Lil as they use the technology and AI encoded alongside them to try and survive.

The advantage of a set-up like this is that it allows for so many stories to be told, and in the first issue of *Arks: Proximan* Audie and Anna Mae Bluford survive in the narrow habitable zone on Proxima B (an exoplanet around Proxima Centauri), even succeeding in having

a child, Oddel, naturally. Then one day they receive a message via laser containing the genome of a girl; once they use the bacteria to construct her, Oddel knows he must keep talking to the girl so his mother won't kill her.

The *Arks* universe is a brutal one, but one rich with humanity, both good and bad, and is a comic series I would highly recommend reading if you like your science fiction both introspective and red in tooth and claw.

The Complete(d) Saucer Country

Paul Cornell, Ryan Kelly
Image Comics

Pb, 440pp, £26.99, ISBN 9781534327481

While Paul Cornell and Ryan Kelly's epic *Saucer Country* (it's 440 pages long and also epic in the truest sense), may be about UFOs, at its heart it is about how myths grow. It looks at how these stories take on a life of their own and can be manipulated to bring information to people's attention or to occlude it.

I think this is an important comic for fortians. Not because *Saucer Country* contains some kind of revelation, but because the comic is itself fortian. We all know the quote from Charles Fort that ‘one measures a circle, beginning anywhere’, and here Cornell and Kelly do that by approaching the myths surrounding UFOs with no bias or agenda.

In this story of the rise of Governor Arcadia Alvarado there

are conspiracies and malicious forces, but there is also a genuine curiosity and sense of exploration, with an affection for how these stories have become so embedded in popular culture.

Kelly's artwork uses the form of the comic to perfectly capture the strangeness of the world, and a special shout out must go to the colourists who have

enhanced that work to make something that is, at times, truly unsettling.

I would recommend *Saucer Country* to anyone with an interest in good storytelling, but for fortians particularly, I think there is much to enjoy here.

Secrets of the Majestic

Edited by Chris Mole & Gary Moloney
www.chrismole.co.uk/comics/majestic/

Pb, 76pp, £12, ISBN 978139990905

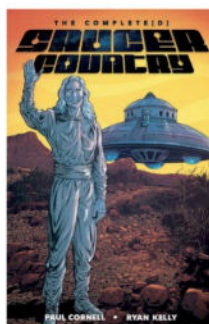
At the heart of the Thought Bubble comics convention is the mid-convention party held at the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate, North Yorkshire, and at the heart of the mid-convention party is a secret that has grown in reputa-

tion over the past few years: the opulent men's toilets with their grandiose stalls, *Twin Peaks*-style floor and luxurious sofa. Why they are so, well, majestic, is a question no one has had an answer for. Until now.

In *Secrets of the Majestic*, Chris

Mole and Gary Moloney have gathered together some of the best comic writers and artists on the planet to solve the mystery of the Majestic men's loos and to answer the question: why are they so damn impressive? Here, Kieron Gillen, Tula Lotay, Sarah Peplow, Rob Burton, Jordan Colver, Laura Jones, Fraser Campbell and many more provide a whole range of answers. There is time travel, horror, dimension slipping and reclaiming space, all presented in a great, genuinely fun anthology.

So can a comic about a convention party's toilets hope for an audience beyond those who attend Thought Bubble? I would argue, definitely yes! As someone whose first bedsit was just around the corner but who never knew about the existence of these reality-warping conveniences, I'm glad this comic exists. It's also a fantastic sampler of the comic talent out there and I would highly recommend grabbing a copy.



THE HAUNTED GENERATION

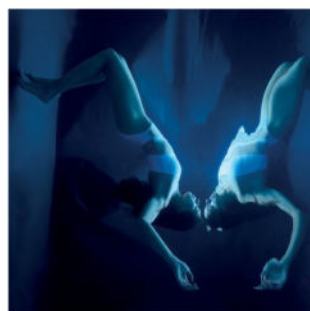
BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY

"It felt dark back then," remembers David A Jaycock. "Dark, cold and detached – closer to Victorian England than to the future. Laundrettes were beacons of warmth and light. Derelict mill roofs could still be walked. Hillards was our local supermarket, and my mum swears she saw a flying saucer hovering above it in the 1960s..."

Those of you already missing the hurly-burly of festive retail might care to check out David's new album *Music For Space Age Shopping*. A touching synth homage to the Brutalist shopping arcades of the mid-20th century, it celebrates the utopian ambition of these concrete monuments while also commemorating the transitory weirdness of architecture that – in many British town centres – swiftly disappeared within a couple of decades. For a prime example, take St Peter's Precinct in David's native Oldham: opened in 1967 and demolished in 1990.

"Nobody I know speaks well of St Peter's Precinct," says David. "People said it was cursed because it was built on a graveyard, but I loved it. I remember pushing my little brother down the massive concrete steps in his pram. Then we'd pay 14p to get the 184 bus to the Arndale Centre in Manchester. Someone there once threw a Santa Claus puppet at us from a moving car and shouted something in French, but I didn't quite catch it."

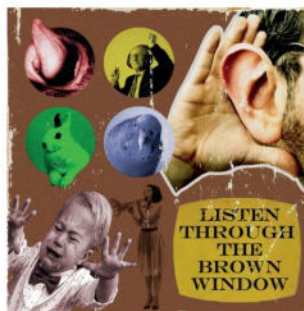
The album is part of what Subexotic Records are pragmatically calling their "Shopping Centre Trilogy". Completing this splendid triumvirate are *Dwell Time*, a muzak-influenced collaboration between Xqui and Dogs Versus Shadows, and *The Lanes Re-Development* by Jonathan Sharp, recording in frankly unconvincing disguise as Carlisle City Council. All three records are affectionate tributes to a vanishing age of retail, and are available from subexoticrecords.bandcamp.com. And if you're



unable to access the website at home, just pop into Rumbelows on a wet Saturday morning and use their Vic-20 when your grandma isn't looking.

Similarly ruminating upon his 1980s childhood is Durham-based rapper Faithful Johannes. His excellent new album *The House At Night* deftly combines his own youthful anxieties (ghosts, zombie classmates, car bombs) with those being freshly cultivated by his young daughter. These include a malevolent river spirit called Tony Rossinger, who – according to the song named in his honour – "struck mostly on a Thursday". Pithy lyrics are accompanied by the slick beats of producer Neocia, and the whole kaboosh is slowly creaking up the stairs at faithfuljohannes.bandcamp.com.

And if those creaky stairs require you to keep the bedside lamp on, surely that's a perfectly good excuse to read the



third instalment of *Stagdale*. Parts One and Two of Frances Castle's affecting graphic novel were released in 2019 and 2021 respectively and explored the time-spanning link between

Max, a 1930s German refugee brought to England by the kindertransport, and Kathy, a troubled schoolgirl living in the same village in 1975. Part Three features hints of a burgeoning supernatural connection between the two youngsters, and is beautifully illustrated in a way that should touch the hearts of pining Raymond Briggs fans. Follow the battered signposts to thehardytree.bandcamp.com.

Elsewhere, I've also been enjoying the *The Owl Service*, Rupert Lally's suitably sinister musical tribute to Alan Garner's classic 1967 novel – it's waiting to be discovered in the attic at rupertlally.bandcamp.com.

I've been into space with Kayla Painter's immersive album *Fractures*, a strident

modular accompaniment to the voyage of NASA's Europa Clipper probe, now hovering above the frozen oceans of kaylapainter.bandcamp.com. And I love Cate Brooks's new record *Prismatics*, a loving recreation of the kind of "corporate electronica" that once soundtracked advertisements for... well, Vic-20 computers. GO TO belburymusic.greedbag.com and RUN.

Meanwhile, an extraordinary all-star cast of weirdies have combined talents for surreal spoof radio broadcast *Listen Through The Brown Window*. Mixing the goofy jingles of vintage local stations with the impenetrable strangeness of vintage BBC schools broadcasts, it's the brainchild of musician Kev Oyston – previously known for his folklore-influenced work as The Soulless Party. "The concept hit me during a solo drive to Scarborough," says Kev. "A strange radio show, as overheard through the crackly window of a mysterious analogue numbers station". Collaborators include actor (and Vic and Bob sidekick) Vaun Earl Norman, *Scarfolk* creator Richard Littler, YouTube sensation Sean Reynard, comic book writer Fraser Geesin and musical duo The Twelve Hour Foundation, alongside one-time actual BBC radio presenter Georgy Jamieson. So if yours was the kind of childhood where it seemed entirely feasible that Richard Stilgoe should visit the home of "Bellend Synthesizers" to discover whether their latest models really *are* powered by beards, then head to Spotify or Mixcloud and simply search for the show's title. But probably avoid visiting Rumbelows on a wet Saturday morning to ask if you can try out the PolyBellend 800.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com.





TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** eye up the small screen's forteen offerings



All programmes dealing with British mythology assert that they will travel the length and breadth of Britain searching out mystery and legend. This offering from *This Country* star Charlie Cooper is no different; in practice he manages to travel only the breadth, from West Wales to Norfolk, but his heart is clearly in the right place.

In the opening lines of his new three-part series, *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* (BBC), he promises to show us that folklore is very much alive, which is surely music to the ears of the discerning forteen connoisseur (unlike the recorder music, which will come later). Cue Charlie in an uncannily orange raincoat (not red – no no!).

In the first episode, we board Charlie's very own Mystery Machine (he does bear an uncanny resemblance to the love child of Shaggy and Scooby-Doo) in search of Black Shuck. We are informed that anyone who sets eyes on this demonic hound will be dead within a year, before being introduced to a string of eyewitnesses... all of whom are patently alive. We move swiftly on to Charlie's overnight stake-out, where he has clearly used the wrong terminology when asking locals about the best places to

Charlie ends up in a prime dogging hotspot in the woods

observe nocturnal canine activity and ends up in a prime dogging hotspot in the woods.

Any lingering erotic ardour is quickly quelled by the uncanny appearance of the local folklorist with his flat cap (on backwards) and recorder. The folklorist wows the viewer with in-depth knowledge of Black Shuck who is, wait for it, "quite a dark character". Charlie then makes a request that no one has ever made, asking "Do you think we could have a tune on the recorder?", a doubly astonishing request as Charlie is a parent. After a mercifully short musical interlude, Charlie asks the folklorist for suggestions about what he could do and where he could go next... we had suggestions of our own, but Charlie went with those of the folklorist.

In episode two, the Mystery Machine rocks up in Wiltshire in search of crop circles. Lucy Pringle, of Chilbolton fame, is there to give Charlie a tour, along

with a coachload of French sightseers (it is unclear whether a cream tea was included in the ticket price). What follows is 30 minutes of Charlie overusing the phrase "I know for a fact", his dad ascribing everything to aliens and some frankly otherworldly statistics claiming that "half of Britons say aliens exist". The one redeeming feature of this episode is Charlie's dabble with dowsing. He looks baffled as he holds the rods. "What are you trying to achieve?" Charlie's friend asks on behalf of us all.

Episode three takes us on yet another quest for King Arthur's treasure. The most stimulating parts of the episode are Charlie searching the house for his uncannily pristine metal detector, and an immaculately coiffured historian who appears to want to get away as soon as possible; perhaps he had only paid for an hour's parking. We know how he feels.

Nosferatu

Dir **Robert Eggers**, US 2024
On general release

Barely a decade on from his feature film debut *The Witch*, Robert Eggers has established himself as a unique voice in the world of contemporary cinema, his trademarks being carefully researched settings for odd tales of yesteryear, desaturated visuals, and heaps of brooding atmosphere often reminiscent of cinema pioneers such as Dreyer and Murnau. So it seems only fitting that Eggers would sink his teeth into retelling Bram Stoker's *Dracula* with his own take on the *Nosferatu* rendition of the Irish author's iconic 1897 gothic horror tale.

Marrying the narrative framework of Herzog's 1979 *Nosferatu the Vampyre* with

the operatically swollen style of Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, Eggers's *Nosferatu* exists at the intersection of previous adaptations without the director losing his own voice, resulting in a worthwhile addition to vampire cinema in general and *Dracula* adaptations in particular.

Threateningly dreamlike, this *Nosferatu* envelops the audience in an ever-mounting sense of dread, weaving a relentlessly dark and tragic narrative tapestry with hauntingly erotic overtones, even if Bill Skarsgård's Count Orlok is more demonic than seductive.

It was filmed in Czechia, and cinematographer Jarin Blaschke once again brings Eggers's vision to life with mesmerising results, using Prague's historic streets to their full potential to create

a credible period setting for the urban portions of the story, and the use of a 13th century gothic castle similarly creates a suitably unsettling setting for the Count's dwelling.

Lily-Rose Depp's portrayal of Ellen – the reluctant object of Orlok's desire – oozes melancholy, moving back and forth between catatonia and mania with sufficient restraint to avoid becoming cumbrous, rhyming well with the sensual intensity brewing beneath Skarsgård's unpleasant special effects makeup.

The other players also embody their characters to create a satisfying gallery of archetypes, and in the time-honoured tradition of Renfield portrayals of all eras, in spite of his sparse screentime, Simon McBurney leaves a lasting impression as Orlok's deranged servant Knock.

As he is known to do, Willem Dafoe also manages to steal scenes as the eccentric Professor Albin Eberhart Von Franz, summoned for his knowledge of the occult, and while Dafoe is used sparingly, he leaves a memorable mark on the film without overshadowing the other performers.

Slowly and steadily writhing its way through its runtime, the pacing is par for the course for those familiar with Eggers's storytelling, feeling no need to rush through the proceedings. Those who don't find his filmmaking compelling are unlikely to be won over by his foray into vampiric horror, but for those who have been anticipating Eggers's latest effort, his take on *Nosferatu* will prove enthralling.

Leyla Mikkelsen



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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times.

Fortean Times keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

FT toes no party line.

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Enigmatic Bristolians

I suppose we'd better add Sun Ra and George Clinton to Neil Nixon's roster in Forum [FT449:54]. On a more frivolous note, early Glastonians Stackridge have a bonus track on their 1972 album *Friendliness* called "Purple Space-ships Over Yatton". As the same LP contains a reference to Annie Besant "Dusting Her Mausoleum", I think we can consider these enigmatic Bristolians a little au fait. (I'm assuming, by the way, that "dusting your mausoleum" isn't a sexual innuendo.)

Richard George

St Albans, Hertfordshire

Oysters

Barry Baldwin may know a lot about the Classics but not very much about nutrition. In FT450:11 he states about oysters: "Inevitably, they were prized as aphrodisiacs, a long-lasting delusion."

Oysters contain the most zinc, weight for weight, of any other food. Zinc is required for testosterone production and the lack of readily available zinc in the body reduces testosterone. Zinc cannot be stored in the body, so a daily intake is required. Testosterone increases sexual desire in both men and women. Some studies have shown a lack of zinc is implicated in erectile dysfunction and infertility. John West manufacture tins of smoked oysters which go beautifully with a nice single malt.

Dr H Joy

By email

Bacon preservation

Mark Spurlock's letter about the *Exchange & Mart* polystyrene pyramid that could supposedly keep a razor sharp [FT448:63] reminded me of something similar. On page 6 of *The World of the Unknown – All About UFOs* (Usborne 1977, reprinted 2020) there is a pyramid and stand which can be cut out (nowadays photocopying is recommended), assembled and used to try and preserve a bacon rasher. This was to prove (or try to prove) that pyramid shapes were better at preserving foodstuffs than boxes.

I wonder if any FT readers

SIMULACRA CORNER



Louise Bates noticed this human form ("dancing perhaps?") when sawing wood for the log burner.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteantimes.com

mutilated their copies of *All About UFOs* and wasted good bacon rashers in carrying out this experiment. If so, please write in.

Gary Watson

Cramlington, Northumberland

Autokinetic effect

I read the suggestion ("Celestial events") by Marinus van der Sluis [FT445:63] that the observation that jolting stars may be due to a mirage, but there is another psychological explanation – the autokinetic effect. This manifests as small points of light against a dark backdrop appearing to shift position. I often see this effect myself, lying in bed at night when the LED on the smoke detector seems to dance around in the darkness.

Paul Lee

By email

Turin Shroud doubts

Regarding the Turin Shroud [FT451:4-5]: If the Shroud had been used on the body of Jesus, even just draped rather than wrapped, surely there would be some sort of 3D effect. The image is clearly 2D, as if painted. Also, Jesus was a first century Middle-Eastern Jew. If he had followed accepted practices, he would have had shortish hair and little or no beard. A week prior to his crucifixion he was being hailed as the new Messiah, the King of the Jews, so it is reasonable to think that he might have tidied himself up a bit. The image looks like the classic European representation of Jesus; long flowing hair, long beard. Not necessarily a 'fake', but not what some would have us believe.

Simon Spreckley

By email

Eggplants

With regard to Allah's name turning up inside an eggplant [FT448:29], I wondered why eggplants? That particular angiosperm is mainly cultivated in India and China, where polytheism tends to prevail. It may have been a case of "casting the net wide", so that the soul in need of comfort had as large a chance as possible, or it may have been pareidolia. I am fascinated to consider whether anyone might have been driven to make the ultimate sacrifice because they chopped an eggplant in half. Eggplants have a specific usage within the emoji language, and Madonna reputedly eats one a day. Alexei Sayle even developed the eccentric character "Mr Aubergine" for his show. They're not usually a nuncio of divine guidance.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Fairy Wings

In response to Scott Wilson's letter regarding the illuminated page from "The Story of the Princess of the Blue Pavilion", and whether it shows winged fairies over a century before they appear in Western art [FT449:65]: unless Mr Wilson is a scholar of untranslated 14th century Persian literature, he cannot say (as he did) that the image "depict[s] winged fairies, explicitly naming them as such". All we can say is there are winged creatures and the cataloguer has called them fairies.

The image description that Mr Wilson refers to is, if my googling is correct, the name given in the catalogue entry of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (in New York). They have the manuscript in their collection and give a few paragraphs of commentary on it (<https://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/140003780?img=0>). Their website notes it was donated in 1913. It seems a safe assumption that the scholarship behind the website's descriptions has developed from around that time, so heavily influenced by a winged fairy tradition in Western

LETTERS

culture that was in full effect by then.

The website entry by “The Met” certainly stresses that these are not just winged but also feathered fairies. It does not, however, feature any translation of the poem which, from other googling, appears to be part of a chapter from the *Hasht-Bihisht* (“The Eight Paradises”) written by Amir Khusrau Dihlavi in the early 14th century. There is said to be no full English translation of the poem and I cannot determine if there is any partial

translation of the chapter where the Princess of Rum tells her tale. Even if it does, and even if the translation uses the term “fairy”, that will only be the word used by the translator. What word did Khusrau use and what cultural understanding of the supernatural was it meant to invoke? Did it refer to wings or was that an addition by the artist Manohar around 300 years later in India (and what was his cultural understanding of what was being described in the text)?

I don’t know where this takes

us. I don’t wish to suggest that we can never make any comment on cultural expressions outside our time and place, but we must appreciate the biases that our own gaze will bring upon our commentary. My understanding of Simon Young’s work on fairies is that he is keen to avoid such biases by making clear his scope of study focuses on the Western traditions. He finds interest in where there are similarities and differences in fairy lore throughout Europe. (Further the article on his fairy census (FT441:38-45)

that Mr Wilson refers to is clear that the replies he received were from English speaking-informants, mostly from English-speaking countries.) Should he – in these sensitive days – preface all his references to fairies with “In some European traditions...” so as to clearly define his terms?

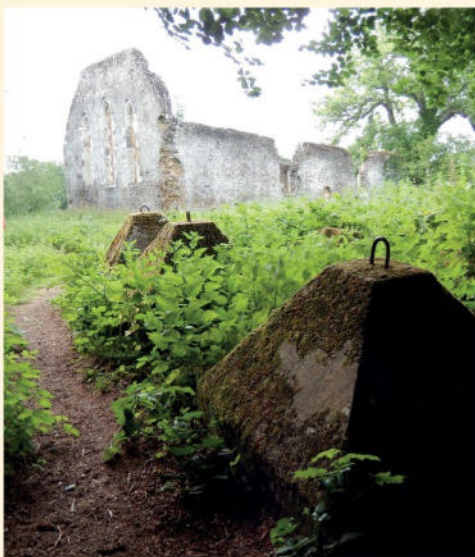
To the same extent, however, we should be cautious drawing conclusions as to the traditions of winged supernatural creatures of 13th to 16th century Indo-Persia based on the wording used in an American catalogue entry. If, however, anyone – and, if it is Mr Wilson, more power to him – is ready to produce an English translation of the *Hasht-Bihisht* with a study of the supernatural creature traditions behind this exquisite image and the text, please take my money as I want it in my library (preferably with full colour plates of the manuscript).

Joel Conn
Glasgow, Scotland

Persistent stalker

The sad case of the Englishman who was mistaken for a musician and stalked for 60 years [FT449:4] reminded me of a Swedish stalking case which also involved arson and went on for around 40 years. The victim that time was a real musician, Evert Taube (1890-1976), one of the most acclaimed singers and songwriters of all time in Sweden. In the early 1960s an extrovert (but mentally unstable) Taube admirer, Mona W, became convinced that the singer was secretly in love with her, despite him being happily married. Mona started writing love letters and following him and his wife around. In the winter of 1969, after Evert Taube had made it very clear that he wanted nothing to do with her, Mona travelled to his beloved summer house outside of Stockholm when it stood empty, and burned it down. She was arrested and admitted to a psychiatric hospital for a few years, but when released continued her stalking of Taube.

After Evert had died, she continued to harass his wife and later turned her attention to their son Sven-Bertil, who by that time had become an actor (*The Eagle Has Landed*, *Puppet on a Chain*) and interpreter of his father’s songs. Mona followed him around, called him, wrote to him, and when



Dragons

As an armchair amateur cryptozoologist I must confess to never having had much interest in dragons. Richard Freeman’s article “The Dragons of Waverley Abbey” [FT451:44-49] proved to be a bit of a turning point. I was expecting perhaps a rather dull account of mysterious carvings in the abbey, but instead I read a thoroughly engaging account of actual sightings of ‘dragons’ at the abbey site. I really enjoyed the author’s knack of making the story ‘human’ and real, whilst being factual and offering some very plausible reasons as to what the dragon sightings actually were. Thankfully, the article didn’t go down the rabbit hole of suggesting that the UK is not the abode of a gigantic, undiscovered species – and actually explains why! I look forward to reading any further information on dragon sightings in the modern era in FT... Hopefully!

James Newton
Catford, London

Regarding *The Dragons of Waverley Abbey*: I approached with caution when I read “A group of 10 people, ghost hunters from the South Coast Ghost group” had been indulging in some Ouija use and the planchette had spelled out the name ‘Zozo’.

It jarred me when Darren Graham of the group

stated “...it was pointless to try and use his camera as it was too dark.” Um. So the South Coast Ghost group come equipped with folding table and Ouija board – but didn’t think that flash photography would be useful at a night-time ‘investigation’?

I cannot possibly comment on what they saw – or think they saw – but credible witnesses to an event need to have some credibility. Sure, you can have a bunch of amateur enthusiasts looking for one thing but witness a different thing. But any belief in what they experienced can only be based on how they behave, their own credentials, their own statements. It can only throw doubt on their claims.

Alan Cassady-Bishop
Bridlington, Yorkshire

I was fascinated by the article on the dragons at Waverley Abbey. The area around the abbey was readied to play an important part in defending against enemy tanks in the event of a land invasion in WWII. It still has many ‘dragon’s teeth’ concrete blocks and anti-tank ditches [pictured at left]. Maybe the recently seen dragons have been drawn to the place looking for their missing molars?

Christine Gormley
By email

I read with interest the article “The Dragons of Waverley Abbey”. It seems very likely to me that the ‘dragons’ were in fact sightings at night of a heron or herons. The yew tree was probably where they were roosting, which is why the creatures went into it. The heron is a large bird and might be considered ‘man sized’ if seen out of context, fleetingly and in the dark. A heron had been seen by the investigators when they turned up, so one was obviously a resident or visitor to the area. The ‘bats’ wings’ described are probably an interpretation of the ragged feathers of the heron’s wings seen in silhouette, the ‘long head’ fits the heron description and the ‘tail’ with the ‘arrowhead’ tip could well be the heron’s legs trailing behind it as it flew, the bird’s feet together giving the impression of a streamlined clump (the ‘arrowhead’). I have seen herons nesting and flying around our local nature reserve many times and believe they could well explain these sightings.

Paul Harris
By email



Sven-Bertil moved to London she travelled there and showed up at his house in Fulham. "I was not afraid but she was a nuisance", he later told a newspaper. When Mona W died in 2008, Sven-Bertil got 15 years free of her stalking until his own death.

Johan Theorin
Stockholm, Sweden

Haunted Places?

From time to time I write emails to various reputed haunted locations, just to see if I get any responses.

I was looking through Darren Mann's forteen website Paranormal Database, starting with the section on the former county of Avon (mainly covering Bristol and Bath), looking for places with recent (21st century) reports of phenomena. I made a list of around 20 locations and emailed them for details. Most didn't reply – but three of them did, as detailed below.



Francis Hotel, Bath

Adrian De Waal wrote: "I have been part of the night team here at the Francis Hotel for about two years now. In my time here I have had quite a few events that could be described as paranormal. The activity, however, seems to be more centred around the staff and I have yet to meet a guest who has had an encounter.

"The first time I really took note that strange things were afoot was when a newly appointed hotel manager decided to move the bust of Solomon Francis (who constructed the original building as townhouses in 1858) from its alcove so he could put a tourist display-stand there. His mistake, however, was to leave the bust of Emily Francis (wife of Solomon) where it was. Within the space of a week, we had at least four of the glass baubles from the lobby chandeliers just fall off and smash on the floor; three of them were from the chandelier closest to the alcove where Emily's bust stood.

That particular bout of activity ended when we moved Emily into the same room as Solomon.

"The other things seem almost benign in comparison. Everything from cold spots to speakers coming to life and playing music while the system is turned off, to the turnstile door in reception turning a full rotation on its own on a windless night. Most of it goes unnoticed and different people have seen different things. One that seems to be recurring is a phantom lady sitting in bed in one of the rooms. I have yet to see her as I hardly have cause to go up to that particular room at night. However, at least three of my colleagues have told me their stories.

"It's always the same in the same room: a staff member goes up and when they enter the room there seems to be a lady sitting in the bed right by the door. Fearful of interrupting a guest, they apologise and back out and then they come to reception to find out who is in the room that is supposed to be empty. When checked, the room is empty, and the bed is made.

"One of the waiters has seen a lady in black turn down a corridor, but when he turned down it himself, there was no sign of her, and he heard no doors open and close. She just disappeared. My colleague on the night shift swears that she keeps feeling someone put an arm around her shoulders or squeeze the top of her arm. It seems to be a gesture of re-assurance or comfort.

"Looking into the history of the building, we don't have any recorded instances of maids hanging themselves as stories suggest, but we do, however, have the deaths of two local gentlemen who died in the hotel the night it was bombed. Records have been lost over time, but its widely believed that they were the night staff taking shelter in the basement.

"All in all, the goings-on here at the hotel, though extremely strange, are few and far between and unless they were going to wander the halls late at night guests are unlikely to encounter anything spooky. But if you end up working here on night shift then you might even hear the ghostly voices that accompany you when you do your rounds, but then they stop when you stop to listen.

"Are they echoes of the past? Or is it just someone up late watching

telly with the volume down low? Working here leaves me with more questions than answers. We have a local psychic who regularly comes to take afternoon tea in Emily's tea-room. She says the place has good energy and I believe her."



Central Library, Bristol

A member of staff who would like to remain anonymous and be credited as a spokesperson, wrote:

"Hi Andy, thank you for your enquiry regarding the possibility that the Central Library may be haunted. I have been working in the building since 1985 but have had no paranormal experiences; most of the time I have been based in the Reference Library, where the tale seems to have originated. This is likely to be the 'grey ghost' which a member of staff was said to have seen in the upper part of the building – possibly the Reference gallery or in the top-most room where she would have worked. This would have been in the 1950s. Margaret Royal and Ian Girvan, the authors of *Bristol Ghosts and their Neighbours* (Abson Books, 1977) have picked up on this, for they refer to the 'Grey Monk' appearing in one of the galleries. The story is repeated in *Haunted Bristol* by Sue Le'Queux (Tempus Publishing, 2004).

"It is true that the Central Library was built on the site of the old Deanery, which in pre-Reformation times would have been on the edge of the Abbey precinct. A potential weakness in the story is that the monks of the Abbey of St Augustine would have worn black habits, but the authors raise the possibility that this was the ghost of a visitor."

Assembly Rooms, Bath

Alice Hancock-Parr, the Business Services Co-Ordinator for Bath



Assembly Rooms, writes: "Hello Andy, thank you for your email. Obviously, Bath is well known as one of the most haunted places in Britain, and there is the classic 'man in a black top hat' story that is told by the ghost tour guides about the Assembly Rooms.

However, I've had a conversation with some of my colleagues to see if there are any personal stories – and there are – albeit not first-hand accounts.

"Apparently, a few years ago, there were two night-shift security guards who both had similar experiences on separate nights, of hearing someone walking in a corridor outside their office, and the door handle moved. When they went to investigate, there was nobody there.

"One of our cleaners apparently once thought they heard someone walking about one time, to the extent that they went to see if anyone had signed in at the staff entrance. I would say in talking with my colleagues (and in particular those of us who have had experiences of paranormal activity in other buildings, or experienced 'feelings' etc), that the general consensus is that we don't feel anything ourselves when here alone, and we (have) felt the building actually has quite a positive energy to it."

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire



It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Spectral typing

It started around the year 2000 (I was 10). I would be lying in bed during the early hours of the morning, and suddenly hear touch typing coming from the desktop computer downstairs. I didn't think much of it at first. My parents worked from home and it wasn't uncommon to wake up and hear Mum typing away at the computer.

One morning, I heard the touch typing again. I got up and called out to Mum, assuming she was down there working. No answer. No one was down there, though I was convinced I heard typing. This began to happen regularly. I figured that I was so used to hearing typing downstairs that I was starting to hear things that weren't there. Because of this, I didn't mention it to anyone, thinking I was going crazy. This happened at random intervals, only between the hours of about 3am to 7am: the sound of fast, manic typing, and fast, furious clicking of a mouse, as if someone was frustrated. The study, where this took place, was directly beneath my bedroom.

One morning, I was eating breakfast when I heard Mum at the top of the stairs: "You're not down there on that computer already!" I froze and ran out to her. I was amazed she heard it too! She was convinced she heard typing, yet nobody was there. I told her about all the times I'd been hearing it, and then my sister revealed she had regularly been hearing it too. I wasn't crazy after all.

I set out to try to catch whatever was causing it, to find a rational explanation. It wasn't the most sophisticated ghost hunting – I was just a kid, and would sprint out of my bedroom to the top of the stairs, where I could look down into the room and see if anyone was at the computer. No such luck. Each time I got there it stopped.

It went on for *years*. We just learned to live with it, because it didn't happen every day. The room was always cold. The phenomenon was at its most active when my sister and I hit puberty and our parents divorced. Understandably, there was a lot of



"The ceiling light globe exploded, sending glass across the room"

energy in the house. At one point, I set up a Ouija board. I didn't have any success, and that night I had the worst fever dream and woke up feeling sick to my stomach. I never touched a Ouija board again. Things only escalated, moving forward.

I was down there one night when the ceiling light globe in the centre of the room began flashing very fast, strobe-like. It then exploded, sending glass across the room. I was terrified and ran out of the room. It was lucky I did, because if I hadn't, I would've been struck with shards of light bulb.

Not long after, I was on the computer at night, home by myself, when something happened that resulted in me never being alone in that room again. I felt (and heard) a sharp intake of breath directly behind my right shoulder near my ear. I never ran so fast in my life! I was hesitant to enter that room ever again. Prior to these incidents, the typing had mostly been some weird, spooky thing – not sinister, not dangerous. It still makes my heart race thinking about it.

It never occurred to me that whatever it was, may have been mimicking our mother typing, try-

ing to lure us downstairs and into that room.

The house was sold in 2007. In 2021, both neighbouring houses surprisingly went on the market at the same time, and sold shortly after. We went to have a look. Our childhood home had changed – a lot. The garden had completely overgrown. Trees and vines were out of control and grass stood tall. Cracks in brickwork, paint chipped away. It actually *looks* haunted now.

The person we sold it to had also made interesting additions to surrounding fences. They have been dramatically extended in height, and resemble those you would find at a zoo, like an enclosure designed to prevent something escaping. Maybe it was too late. Perhaps something *did* escape and this is why neighbours sold-up within days of each other.

Rowan MacDonald
Kingston, Tasmania

Bookshop synchronicities

I was pleasantly surprised to read Lewis Hurst's letter regarding the apparent propensity of bookshop customers to select books that have recently been shelved [FT444:64]. I have been a bookseller for many years, and have noted exactly the same thing. Indeed, I had only mentioned it to one of my colleagues the other week, having seen it happen.

The obvious explanation of course, is selective perception – you notice it happening a couple of times, and the pattern recognition part of your brain picks up further instances while ignoring all the many times it doesn't happen. It could also be suggested that either I or Mr Hurst have 'seeded' the idea by discussing it with each other, but this is not the case – as far as I know I have never had any contact with him, and the topic is one I rarely mention to anyone.

Those with a liking for 'magical' explanations may suggest that the books involved are ones that the bookseller particularly wants to sell, and they are somehow putting the 'fluence on the customer. In my experience, however, the books are neither particularly expensive nor favourites of mine.

Assuming the phenomenon is real, if pressed for an explanation, the best I can come up with is that recent handling leaves a faint human scent on the books, and that on some subliminal level this attracts the browser's favourable attention.

I wonder if other booksellers have noticed the phenomenon?

Jake Kirkwood
Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire

More spooky episodes

- On a winter's day around the year 2000, some 150 miles [240km] from home on a Sunday, there was an unexpected snowfall just before we were due to drive up the A1. We were in our red Rover, about to set off when an image popped into my head. It was just a flash lasting no more than two seconds, so I couldn't take in any detail; but I could see a lot of snow on the ground and two cars – a red one and a blue one, touching each other at an angle. It was clear they had crashed. A feeling of great foreboding came over me, along with the certainty that we should delay our journey. I told my wife Ande what I "had seen" and suggested we hold back for an hour. She shrugged: "A coffee would be good."

We got home safely, but next day in the local press was a

report of a crash on the A1 the previous afternoon. The report was accompanied by a picture – a red car and blue car touching, at an angle – not unlike the image I ‘saw’, only this time there was a lot of damage and injury to drivers.

“That could have been us,” I said to my wife. “Weirdo,” she replied.

- My wife and I both watched live TV as the horrors of 9/11 unfolded in 2001. Speculation was rife as to when America would retaliate.

On a Saturday morning some three weeks later, my wife was going to pick up our daughter, a 250-mile [400km] round trip that would take her five hours. She dropped me at my place of work. We had received multiple orders from a new client on the Friday afternoon. I could get a lot done in five hours in an empty office. I set to work, raising 20 or more purchase orders and faxing them off, each order combined with work tickets, production plans, delivery schedules, and production advice notes for the factory floor. My mind was truly in a whirl as I raced along, never failing to double-check everything. I wasn’t quite finished when my wife got back. It took me a further half hour to do so and ended with a thumping headache. Despite painkillers, that headache really took hold, right in the centre of my forehead. The thump of the ache turned into blinding white pain. It felt as if someone had driven a six-inch nail through my skull. I knew of the pineal gland, of course. Mine felt like it was on fire.

By 8pm I could barely open my eyes and thought I might be having a stroke. “If this doesn’t start getting better by 9 o’clock,” I said to my wife after taking more painkillers, “I think I might need a hospital.”

Maybe some 10 minutes later, words came from my mouth with no bidding from me.

“The Americans will drop their bombs tomorrow.”

I followed that up with, “I never said that.”

The pain eased quickly, the bright burn fading rapidly. By 9pm the ‘headache’ was totally gone – and I was hungry.

Next day, we were in the car, radio on, it was 3pm when the broadcast was interrupted with the news that America had finally retaliated. “Weirdo,” said my wife.



“I was reading in bed when again ‘something’ took hold of one of my big toes”

- A local lake, shaded around its perimeter by many trees, was ideal for walking our dog, Ollie, on a hot day. One hot summer morning I was driving the three miles to get there – a glorious day, not a cloud in the sky, looking forward to the walk. As I neared the lake, approaching the final roundabout, a feeling of dark foreboding dropped over me like a heavy weight. Despite the beautiful day, I just knew that I had to stay away. I drove around the roundabout and headed straight home, much to Ollie’s disgust. About an hour later, while playing ball in the back garden with Ollie, I spotted two helicopters which looked to be flying above where the lake would be – a police chopper and an air ambulance. We learned later that a man had been chased by a dog, had fallen into the lake and drowned. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t listened to my Spidey sense.

My niece once said upon hearing my tales of weirdness, that I must be ‘tuned in’. She could be right. I’m a believer in the absolute spectrum of everything everywhere all at once. So, is it in the genes? My family indicates this could be the case... My brother and sister both have had similar experiences, yet my wife and her family have nothing ‘unexplained’ to tell of.

- A final incident: in 1993 my mother was diagnosed with

breast cancer at the same time as her good friend and neighbour, Marion. Marion died around a month before my mother was taken into a hospice. One day, the docs told us that Mam was ‘shutting down’ and that family should come in. Mam was out of it, pumped with morphine and the like. She lay there peacefully, eyes closed, unable to speak as tears fell all around. And then, just moments before her dying breath, she did speak.

“Is that you, Marion?” she said, “Marion?”

And that’s my lot. I’m yet to see a fairy or a gnome or a strange creature, and as yet have not managed to extinguish streetlamps in passing or play havoc with electrical equipment. Nor has my soul left my body to travel, and to my knowledge I have not been probed by Mr Grey. Though I live in constant hope.

John Hudspith
South Yorkshire

Squeezed in the night

In the early 2000s I moved to a renovated, single-bedroomed terraced cottage hundreds of years old, in Oundle, Northamptonshire. It was typically cold no matter what the weather and I was there for around 18 months. I had been there a couple of weeks and I was in bed one night – all the strange things happened while I was not long in bed – but definitely still awake, as I am one of those unfortunates who seem to take an eternity to drift off to sleep.

Anyway, I was in bed lying on my side facing the window with my arm over the side of my head and down my face. Suddenly it felt as if someone pulled or tugged a few times on my arm,

not to pull me out of bed but just to push my arm further down my face, or to let me know I was a paying guest, not the long-term resident! It was more of a force or pressure from something pushing or pressing down from above, not pulling the arm itself down. Looking around revealed nothing.

Around a year into my stay, by far the strangest incident happened. Again I was in bed, it was the early hours, maybe 2am, and I was lying on my side having a text argument – and was very much awake. The only light would have been from the phone, as no bedside light was on and very little bled in from outside.

I would text, put the phone on the bedside table and would get the response quickly, and so it went on. So lying on my side... arguing... when suddenly it felt as if ‘something’ or ‘someone’ lay down on top of me, completely, from my shoulder down my arm, onto my side and following the contours of my waist down to the bend at my knee. Whatever it was, it was quite a weight. But then ‘something’ that felt like a hand gripped my shoulder quite firmly and shook it for what felt like a long time, but was probably 10–20 seconds, certainly long enough that I was more than a bit startled and a host of thoughts went through my head – flight being one of them!

Then just as abruptly it stopped and after a while, my heart pounding, I was brave enough to turn on the bedside light. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Then the text started again and the argument resumed, albeit my heart was not in it. Then, about 30 minutes later the same thing happened again: the weight of ‘something/one’ lying down along the whole length of my body and my shoulder grabbed and shaken. Then, as before, it stopped abruptly and a restless night went on.

After a few months, I left and moved into my own place. A couple of weeks before I vacated I was reading in bed when again ‘something’ took hold of one of my big toes and shook it from side to side. Again I felt the pressure of the grip and the shaking, though this time it felt less aggressive and actually somewhat reassuringly playful. I never felt threatened or terrified, just surprised and apprehensive when it happened.

Clifton Stewart
By email

LETTERS



Collectable cards

I have a particular interest in weirdness found in every day occurrences that many wouldn't think about twice. Last summer I was walking to a friend's house in Halesowen, West Midlands, when I came across a top trumps card lying on the pavement directly in my path. It was from the 'baby animals' set, and it featured a duckling, appropriately scored with a '10' in cuteness, but a mere '2' in mischief, and '1' in size and loyalty. I'm a lover of the Midlands canal network, and every year I enthusiastically follow the lives of the waterfowl, so I kept Duck (Duckling) as a souvenir. It still lives in my phone's case.

Approximately a week after this, another friend encountered a different card from the same set, this time a baby koala, outside of his house in Wolverhampton! It trumps duckling in size and mischief, but naturally loses out on cuteness. This on its own I considered to be unusual; the distance between the two sites is a little over 10 miles, so I was amazed when a few days later I found a third piece to the puzzle. Baby hippopotamus, supreme in size but again lacking in cuteness, this time found not in the street, but on the floor of my workplace in Merry Hill shopping centre.

At the time of sending, these three are the only cards I've managed to collect but, if childhood memory serves, top trumps come in packs of 30. I'm not sure if the

other 27 will reveal themselves to me in time, but I'm waiting patiently. Perhaps another local reader will stumble upon them first... The only link between the three sites that I can find is myself, unless I'm missing some sort of Black Country sacred geometry. I'm hoping somebody can shed some light on this very minor synchronicity.

Chris Deighton

Tettenhall, West Midlands

Golf ball mystery

On reading 'The Great Golf Ball Mystery' by Andy Owens [FT451:52-53] it occurred to me that there were a couple of key pieces of information missing, which could point to a solution to where some, if not all, of the golf balls originate.

Firstly, as any keen golfer will tell you, a golf ball is not just a golf ball. They vary greatly in quality and therefore price. At the bottom of the pile is the range ball. These are cheap, low quality golf balls that are used on practice ranges. Most golf ranges will have their name printed on the balls as a way of stopping theft, so should be easy to identify. Balls that are used in play are printed with the name of the manufacturer and the model of ball (if there is a ball that doesn't, put it below the range balls!). In the picture of Scott Rhine displaying some of the golf balls he has collected which accompanies the article you can just see some of the logos.

Every golfer can tell you the quality of a golf ball just by the name. For example, in the UK a dozen Altius golf balls will cost you around £12. A dozen Taylor-made TTP5X will set you back around £55. If people are wildly practising in fields, etc (as I have seen a few builders do on building sites!) they are unlikely to be using top quality balls at around £5 a time!

Secondly, under the Rules of Golf, every golfer must mark his or her ball before teeing off to enable identification. Manufacturers print a number from 1 to 9 on the golf ball to help with this, but this is not enough to uniquely identify it. Therefore it would be extremely useful to know if the

balls were marked and if they were, what those marks were. An enquiry at the nearest course could identify the owner(s).

As a once-keen golfer (sadly, a bad back has put an end to my involvement) I would guess that the solution lies with wildlife. I have seen gulls and magpies (not to mention the odd dog!) steal golf balls, and I would not be surprised if squirrels grabbed a few. And remember, it need not be done in clear sight of golfers. You can lose five or six balls during a round of golf, so the local wildlife could be coming across them in the undergrowth.

So the next time you see a report of Mystery Golf Balls, ask the right questions!

Gary Tavender

Howden, East Yorkshire

I read "The great golf ball mystery" with interest and can throw some light on this. A few years ago I was doing a lot of conservation work at Folkestone Warren, a vegetated undercliff area adjacent to a beach and a golf course. I was puzzled by the number of golf balls among the vegetation or just lying on the ground. With a golf course not far away, this at first did not seem that much of a mystery, though the area where I was working seemed too far away from the course for stray balls to have been hit. Also they were not found elsewhere nearby, such as by the side of a footpath, pavement, road or the grassy cliff top.

After finding some 30 balls, I decided to take them to the course keepers' hut, thinking that perhaps some kids had stolen them and were throwing them over the cliff top and that they should be returned. When I presented these balls I was met with laughter. The lady in the golf hut was amazed by the number of them; some looked quite old, so had been lying in the vegetation for a long time – hence it not being noticed how many had gone missing.

Apparently, seagulls had been seen to carry away golf balls on the green on more than one occasion. Having watched gulls over many years I have seen them drop shells from a height onto a flat concrete surface to break them open. The golf hut

staff and I decided they probably thought the golf balls were eggs and were taking them to drop, hopefully breaking them open. Why the area of Folkestone Warren though? I think the answer is the concrete sea wall area by the beach there. It seems many of the balls did not get that far, as the gulls probably had difficulty hanging on to them and dropped them before reaching the seawall.

Paul Harris

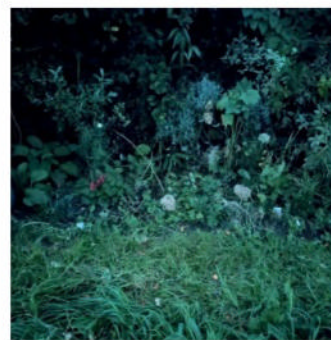
By email

At the bottom of the garden

My mobile probably wasn't the best way to take night photos, but does anyone have an idea what these lights in my longish lawn were in last, very warm, early September? They pulsed at different rates. They got gradually weaker and disappeared mid-September. They had been stronger two days before, when I first noticed them. I guessed glow worms, but the Glow-worm Society was very dismissive and said they were laser reflections! Just to be clear, no lasers or coloured lights were around that autumn. My alternative seems to be fairies in the garden!

Georgina Skipper

Wyke Regis, Dorset



PECULIAR POSTCARDS



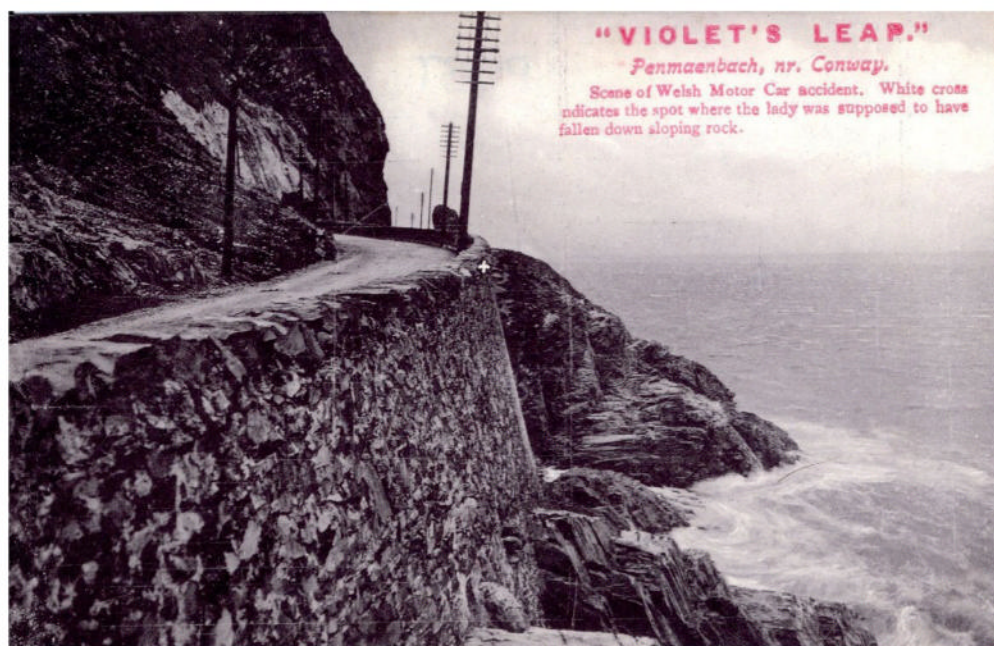
JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past tells the story of a fashionable adventuress whose apparant death created a local landmark

49. VIOLET'S LEAP

Violet Charlesworth was a wealthy and fashionable young lady in Edwardian times. She lived with her mother, sister and brother, and let large and comfortable houses in England and Scotland. Born in 1884 as one of the four children of David and Miriam Charlesworth, she had been brought up under modest circumstances, but it was said that she was a great heiress, and that on her 25th birthday, she would inherit £75,000. Since she was the god-daughter of General Gordon, who had perished in Khartoum, she added 'Gordon' to her name as a tribute to the great soldier.

In 1907, Violet wanted to rent a large house in North Wales, with a kennel for her pack of St Bernard dogs. She took Bod Erw in St Asaph and installed her canine companions there, along with her mother and her elder sister Lilian. Since her wealth was well known locally, she obtained credit from all the tradesmen in Rhyl and St Asaph. The local doctor, who became engaged to marry this fashionable heiress, lent her more than £4,000. There was a murmur of appreciation as the tall and good-looking Violet came into town with one of her St Bernard dogs on a lead. She sometimes called herself "the Honourable Violet Charlesworth" and said that a friend in Melbourne would give her £150,000.

Violet was fond of motor cars, and she rented a fashionable Belgian car, a Minerva Landaulette, from a company in London. On 2 January 1909, with her 25th birthday just 11 days away, she made an excursion in this car, along with her sister Lilian Charlesworth and the chauffeur



ABOVE: A postcard celebrating the escapade of the Penmaenbach adventuress, with some explanatory notes.

Watts. Not long after, Lilian came running to the Ship Inn nearby, exclaiming that her younger sister had just crashed a car into the sea wall, and been thrown headlong into the sea. And indeed, the Minerva Landaulette was discovered at Penmaenbach, having crashed with some force; the windscreen was broken, but there was no blood at the scene and the car was still roadworthy. A Welshman passing the scene on foot had searched for Violet's body, but it was nowhere to be found, although the water was too shallow for it to be swept out to sea.

There was consternation in St Asaph and Rhyl when it turned out that Violet had accumulated debts in excess of £27,000 to her doctor friend, various tradesmen, landlords and a London stockbroker who had financed her gambling on

The windscreen was broken, but there was no blood at the scene and the car was roadworthy

the Stock Exchange. Her story of the impending inheritance turned out to be entirely false. Her houses in Wiltshire and St Asaph were seized, and their contents sold off in lieu of unpaid rent; even one of the St Bernards went under the hammer, fetching 11 guineas. There was debate whether Violet had really perished in the motoring accident, or whether this cunning young

woman had in fact staged the crash to fake her death and make an escape from her creditors. And, indeed, she was discovered by a reporter in Oban, where she was staying under the name of McLeod, arrested and tried at the Derby Assizes in 1910, together with her mother, who was believed to be the mastermind of the plot. Mrs Miriam Charlesworth was sentenced to five years in prison; she died in 1920 at the age of 69. Violet herself escaped with three years behind bars; the 1911 Census found her as an inmate in HM Female Convict Prison, Aylesbury, but her activities after leaving prison remain obscure, quite possibly due to a change of name.

Violet's Leap in Penmaenbach is still pointed out to visitors, and postcards of this local landmark enjoyed healthy sales.

THE HAUNTED HANKY

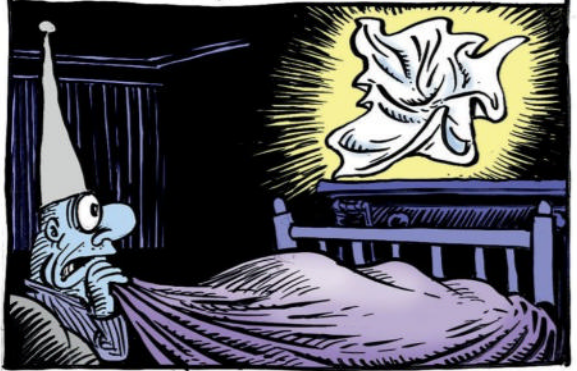
I WAS AT A SEANCE...
AN EVENING OF TABLE
RAPPING, MANIFESTATIONS,
AND MESSAGES FROM BEYOND!



AS I WAS LEAVING,
I SPOTTED A CLEAN
HANDKERCHIEF,
APPARENTLY LEFT
BY A DEPARTING
GUEST! I PUT IT IN
MY POCKET...



THE...HORROR BEGAN THAT NIGHT!
I WAS AWAKENED BY MOVEMENT
IN MY ROOM, AND AN EERIE
LIGHT! IT WAS THE HANKY-
ANIMATED IN A MOST UNNATURAL
MANNER... WRITHING AND
SQUIRMING...



I REALIZED IT WAS
HAUNTED!



AT FIRST IT WAS CONTENT TO
PARADE AROUND MY ROOM
LIKE A MINIATURE SHROUD...



...BUT IT BECAME BORED
WITH THAT, AND BEGAN
DOING ANNOYING MAGIC
TRICKS!



ONE NIGHT THE HANKY WENT
COMPLETELY OVER THE TOP,
PRODUCING BOTTLES AND
GLASSES BY THE THOUSAND...





I HAD TO THREATEN IT WITH EXORCISM TO MAKE IT STOP!



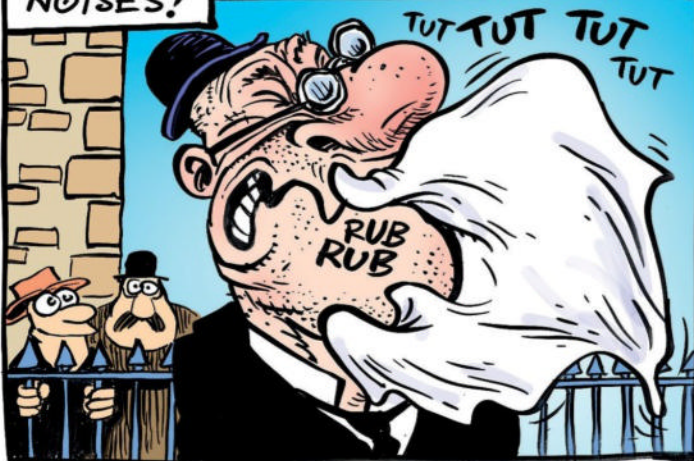
NOW IT'S CONTENT TO REMAIN IN MY POCKET, MAKING FREQUENT APPEARANCES TO BLOW MY NOSE IN PUBLIC, WHETHER I REQUIRE THIS SERVICE OR NOT!



THIS CAN BE EMBARRASSING...



...BUT MOST HUMILIATING OF ALL IS WHEN IT GRASPS MY CHIN AND WIPES MY FACE CLEAN WITH A BIT OF SPIT, ALL THE WHILE MAKING LOUD TUTTING NOISES!



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THE TATTARISUO MYSTERY

A DARK TALE OF GRAVE-ROBBING
FINNISH WITCHES



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CAPTAIN MAINWARING:
PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR



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ZEELAND ALIENS,
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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Vijaya Lakshmi Gali, 48, was resting on a roadside bench in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on her way to a nearby temple when the ground opened beneath her and both Gali and the bench she was sitting on were engulfed by an eight-metre (26ft) deep sinkhole, disappearing from view in a swirl of water. Emergency services were immediately called and began an intensive eight-day search involving 110 rescuers, including scuba divers, sewer workers and firefighters, using sniffer dogs, robotic cameras and ground penetrating radar. However, they could find no trace of Gali, apart from her slippers, which were discovered on the first day of the operation, before having to abandon their search on safety grounds. *BBC News*, 23 + 31 Aug 2024.

Kristina Joksimovic, 38, from Binningen, near Basel in Switzerland, was crowned Miss Northwest Switzerland in 2007 and was a finalist for Miss Switzerland, going on to make a career as a catwalk coach for other models. In February, though, her body was discovered in the family home and her husband Thomas arrested for her murder. Police discovered that he had strangled Joksimovic, dismembered her with a jigsaw, knife and garden shears and was in the process of "pureeing" her remains in a blender prior to dissolving them in a chemical solution when he was arrested. Police said Thomas showed "a noticeably high level of criminal energy, lack of empathy and cold-bloodedness after killing his wife" and "concrete indications of a mental illness". *nypost.com*, 11 Sept 2024.

Russian health blogger Zhanna Samsonova, 39, was a successful social media influencer living in Thailand, whence she regularly went online to extol the virtues of her six-year diet that consisted of only tropical fruit juice. "I eat simple food, although I have a lot of experience as a raw food chef," she said. Samsonova promoted a diet that eliminated salt, oil and all sources of protein and periodically took to "dry fasting" when she neither ate food nor drank water. This, she maintained, kept her in the peak of health; she said that she never had a cold and claimed people frequently said they couldn't believe she was nearly 40. However, friends and online followers grew concerned about her increasingly haggard appearance

and when she died in July from a combination of malnutrition and exhaustion she was described as "looking like a walking skeleton". Despite her appearance, family members insisted a "cholera-like" infection was what killed her, not her diet. *Irish Independent*, 3 Aug 2023.

Barry Griffiths, 57, from Llandrindod Wells, Wales, lived alone in sheltered housing after a stroke left him with limited use of one of his arms, and was described as a "very private man". After he did not turn up at work for more than a week, though, work colleagues alerted police. Officers found Griffiths dead in his flat. He was lying on his bed, fully clothed with a stab wound in his stomach and there was a trail of blood leading back to the kitchen. Investigating officer Detective Chief Inspector Jonathan Rees said that there was no sign of a struggle and that "the bottom drawer of the freezer had been left open," adding, "on the kitchen work surface were two uncooked burgers, a knife and a tea towel." Noting that the wound in Griffiths's abdomen was at about worktop height, he said, "My hypothesis was that he was attempting to separate frozen burgers using the knife," concluding that Griffiths must have slipped while doing so and stabbed himself. As he was using a large chef's knife, the injury was serious, and he died from loss of blood. *Sun*, 19 Sept; *notthebee.com*, 26 Sept 2024.

Giulia Manfrini, 36, from Turin in northern Italy, was surfing off the Mentawai Islands in Indonesia when, according to Lahmudin Siregar from the Regional Disaster Management Agency, "Unexpectedly, a swordfish jumped towards Manfrini and stuck her." The fish's sharp rostrum left a stab wound about five centimetres (2in) deep in her upper left chest. Siregar added, "Even with the brave efforts of her partner, local resort staff and doctors, Giulia couldn't be saved," and she "died almost immediately." Death by leaping swordfish is rare, but not unprecedented; a 39-year-old fisherman in Malaysia died in 2007 after a swordfish jumped out of the water and stabbed him through the eye, and a number of other people have died from being stabbed by swordfish while in the water. *BBC News*, 21 Oct; *editions.cnn.com*, 22 Oct 2024.



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